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COVER: We bid a fond but sad farewell to Babylon 5, J. Michael Straczynski's five year novel for television. Painting by John Monteleone. ABOVE: The cover art of Romas sells books. To see why, visit the Gallery on page 76.

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

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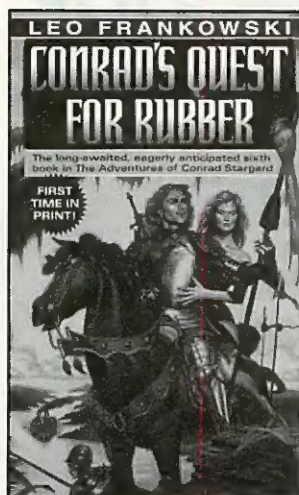
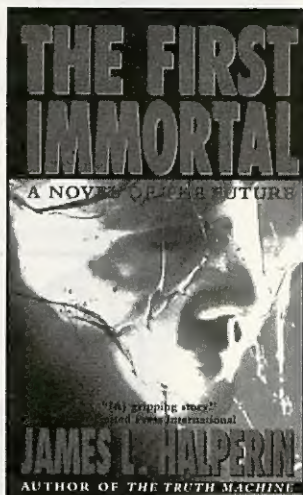
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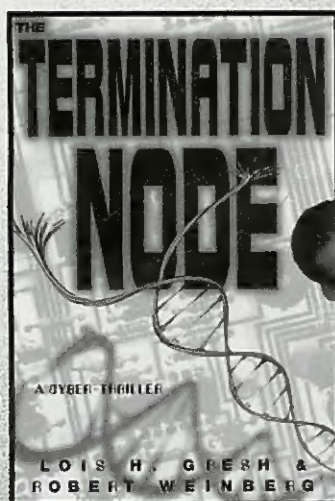
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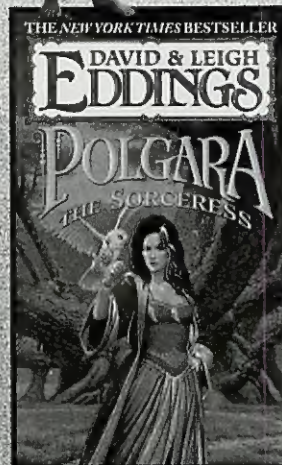
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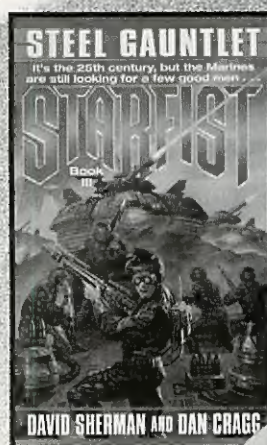
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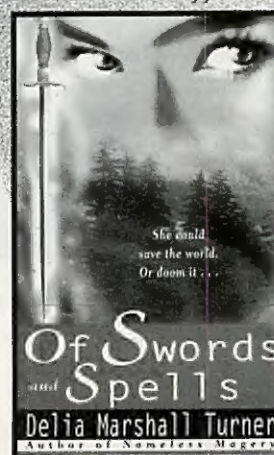
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EDITORIAL

The millennium is coming, so let's go back to the future.

IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR AGAIN. 1998 IS OVER and you hold in your hands the first issue of *Science Fiction Age* dated 1999, as we together head another year closer to a new millennium. Which paradoxically means that I must today ask you not to look toward the future, but instead look back to our shared past. It is once more time for you to tell us your favorite stories of the previous year.

As before, I've organized the stories below along the same lines as used by voters for the Hugo and Nebula Awards. To clarify, Novellas are those stories greater than 17,500 words but not as long as a novel, Novelettes are pieces of fiction over 7,500 words but not more than 17,500, and Short Stories are tales no greater than 7,500 words. As before, we naturally hope that after you vote in our readers' poll you will turn your attention to those other Science Fictional popularity races, remembering, of course, that if any of the titles below stir up fond memories, you will take that into account as you fill out your ballot.

To help us choose the winners in our own olympics, just write the names of your two favorites in each category on a postcard and send it in to me at *Science Fiction Age* Readers' Poll, 11305 Sunset Hills Road, Reston, VA 20190. If you so choose, you can instead send your choices to me at the E-mail address of scottedelman@erols.com. Results will be announced in our May 1999 issue.

NOVELLAS

- "The Colonel in Autumn" by Robert Silverberg (March)
- "Coolhunting" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (July)
- "The Cuckoo's Boys" by Robert Reed (September)
- "Jumping Off the Planet" by David Gerrold (January)
- "Saddlepoint: Roughneck" by Stephen Baxter (May)

NOVELETES

- "Craphound" by Cory Doctorow (March)
- "A Dance to Strange Musics" by Gregory Benford (September)
- "Founding Fathers" by Stephen Dedman (March)
- "Just a Couple of Freelance Strikebreakers Arguing Economics in the Liver of Justice" by Adam-Troy Castro (May)
- "Just a Couple of Subversive Alien Warmongers Floating All Alone in the Night" by Adam-Troy Castro (September)
- "Marooned on the Railroad to Moscow"

by Eric T. Baker (May)

- "The Mechanical Grammar" by David Ira Cleary (September)
- "Skin Dragons Talk" by Ernest Hogan (March)
- "Terraforming Terra" by Jack Williamson (September)

SHORT STORIES

- "Amendment" by Stephen Dedman (September)
- "Deep Future" by Eric Brown (July)
- "Downsize, Downtime" by Karen Haber (May)
- "Fat Cat on a Hat" by Nick DiChario (January)
- "First Fire" by Terry Bisson (September)
- "Here Our Steps Faltered" by Dana William Paxson (September)
- "The Hitchhiking Effect" by Gene O'Neill (May)
- "I Borrow Dave's Time Machine" by S.N. Dyer (March)
- "In Future" by Andrew Weiner (September)
- "Jack Neck and the Worrybird" by Paul Di Filippo (July)
- "Microcosmic Dog" by Michael Swanwick (November)
- "Out of Space, Out of Time" by David Langford (September)
- "Outcolony" by Wil McCarthy (January)
- "The Perigee of the Moon" by Resa Nelson (July)
- "The Practical Ramifications of Interstellar Packet Loss" by William Shunn (September)
- "The President's Channel" by John Kessel (September)
- "The Purchase of Earth" by Jack Williamson (July)
- "The Tour" by Brian Stableford (January)
- "We" by Scott MacKay (January)

As you think back on 1998, let's not forget the poor artists as well. My thoughts are on one, in particular. Since the publication of last issue's magnificent *X-Files* cover, readers have written and E-mailed for the artist's name, as in the crush of deadlines, we inadvertently left that Michelangelo's identity off of the Table of Contents. His name is John Monteleone, and he is also the painter of this issue's *Babylon 5* cover scene that accompanies our article saying farewell to the SF show that has best translated our written SF to the medium of television. Remember Monteleone's name, as I'm sure that his future fame will more than make up for our past error.

Scott Edelman

Dear Mr. Edelman:

Let me just cut the normal introductory phrasing you must usually get and go straight for it:

Concerning the September 1998 issue—I am a little shocked you would publish Terry Bisson's "First Fire" with the punchline it had. This is the same basic idea as Arthur Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God," and concludes with the same words, one of the most famous last sentences in Science Fiction: "Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out."

Let me say this directly to Mr. Bisson: It was sheer laziness to take this promising premise and literally plagiarize Arthur C. Clarke's conclusion. You are obviously a writer of resource and creativity. You should know better. *Never let it happen again.*

Scott, you gotta watch these people.

Daniel L. Brenton

Actually, Bisson's borrowing of the last line—and not any of Clarke's story line itself—was not theft, but rather a literary tip of the hat, akin to writers tossing in references to Shakespeare, the Bible, and other esteemed literary ancestors. I recognized the line immediately. Bisson wasn't trying to put anything over on you, but instead was hoping you'd catch his reference and smile with a sense of recognition. We're sorry it got you agitated instead.

Dear Editor:

I am rarely compelled to write letters to the editor, but I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed "Out Of Space, Out Of Time." This was one of the most enjoyable stories I have ever seen appear in your magazine. David Langford is to be commended for his fine Lovecraftian portrayal. In an era when the only source for horror fiction seems to be our nightly newscast, it is great to see something like this in print. They say that horror is dead, and judging from the lack of magazines on the newsstand that print it, one may be tempted to agree. I'm glad you printed this story and I hope to see more like it every so often. Good job!

Brian Keene

Dear Mr. Edelman:

First, let me say that *Science Fiction Age* is by far the best SF magazine available. It is comprehensive, aesthetically pleasing, and packed with good reading material. That said, though, I'd like to offer some thoughts on your discussion of Thomas M. Disch's

The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of (September '98.)

First, you are, of course, correct that "Hard SF" rather than "hard-core SF" (which strikes one as vaguely pornographic) is the appropriate term for this sub-genre. It may interest you to know though, that before settling on "Hard SF," a number of experimental variants were employed by editors and writers. According to Gary Westfall's *Cosmic Engineers: A Study of Hard Science Fiction* (Greenwood Press: Westport, CT), Judith Merrill may have coined the term "hard-core SF" back in 1968; Brian Aldiss also used it in 1970; and the cover blurb for the original paperback edition of *Ringworld* (also 1970) referred to Larry Niven as "a hardcore science fiction writer." While Disch may not be up to speed on the currently favored usage, he may have been thinking along these lines when he used this passé term.

Second, you object to Lester del Rey's being called "a minor SF writer." But in my opinion, he was a minor writer in what was at the time a minor genre. A great editor, publisher, and historian, sure. But fiction writer? Please. If "Helen O'Loy" is his best, then Disch is justified in consigning it to the trash bin. At best it is a historical curiosity that bears witness to the puerile fantasies and overt sexism of early SF.

While it is true that Disch's critique of SF seems at times brusque and cavalier (for instance, his nasty characterization of Ray Bradbury as "a lifelong child impersonator of a stature equal to that of Pee-Wee Herman"), it is also true that it is a bracing tonic for those who may have waded through the sophomoric pandering and self-congratulatory tone of works such as David Hartwell's *The Age of Wonders*. Disch's text is clearly in line with the critical analysis of Damon Knight's *In Search of Wonder*. His castigation, for example, of Robert Heinlein as a racist, xenophobe, and ultra-rightwing militarist was both unflinching and perceptive.

Your primary bitch with Disch seems to be his superficial treatment of the privileged position of SF fandom from someone touted as a "consummate insider." But is Disch an "insider" because he is a fan, or because he is a writer? My guess is that his knowledge and intimacy with fandom is rather more limited than his knowledge and intimacy with writing. And while your recapitulation of the genesis of the "Reality is a Crutch" motto is interesting (if telling about the siege mentality of fans), your castigation of Disch for his ignorance of fandom's defensive posturing is

making a mountain out of a molehill. Is that the most important remark in the book? What about his discussion of the sexism inherent in the selection of stories in *The Norton Anthology of Science Fiction*? Or the "jingoist tone" of E.E. ("Doc") Smith that "can still be heard reverberating in the work of Heinlein, Pournelle, et al."? Or Poe as the forerunner of SF? Or SF's treatment of the Other? Or his claim that "until the early '50s, the English had a virtual monopoly on the writing of enduring SF?" The book is chock full of trenchant remarks that might be debated, yet it seems that you chose the most trivial, or from a "true insiders" perspective, the most insulting, comments and built your remarks around them.

And so, rather than steer potential readers clear of Disch's "dangerous" book, I heartily recommend that anyone interested in a clear-eyed iconoclastic study of the genre read it. If anything, science fiction needs *more* dangerous critics who refuse to solicit the "Gee Wiz, Isn't Science Fiction the Greatest?" response. If Science Fiction is to raise itself out of the pulp ghetto of its birth then it will only happen because (1) writers aspire to literary quality work, and (2) literary critics take an unblinkered and objective view of its virtues and its flaws.

Lucius M. Nelligan Sorrentino

Yes, Disch's book was filled with his usual entertaining and trenchant wit. But it was difficult, for me at least, to shrug off those parts of the book that were incorrect or misleading long enough to trust the rest.

Dear Scott:

Woah. I didn't realize Disch had turned coat and is riding a decaying orbit. As if there's not enough skewed perceptions about the SF genre in the general public already, Disch has to go and toss another stone in the water to distort the pond. Thanks for the warning in your Editorial.

I wish we did the best of what we do more often as well. But then I read another Adam-Troy Castro story about Nimmitz and Vossoff and I have to think, hell, sometimes in a world that takes itself so seriously, I just want a good chuckle.

Cheers,
Moontrace

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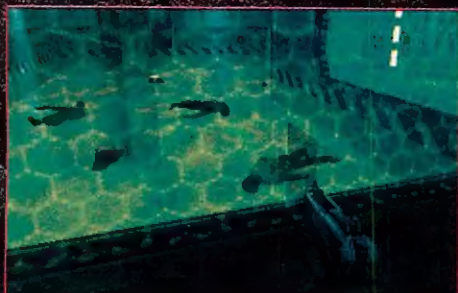
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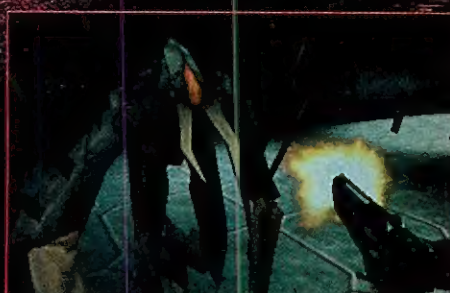
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IT'S ONE OF THE MOST COMMON THEMES IN SCIENCE fiction: mankind's Manifest Destiny to spread out among the stars and inhabit the galaxy, while seeking out other intelligent life with which to cooperate. It is indeed at least a secondary theme in virtually all hard SF. With Poul Anderson's latest novel, *Starfarers* (Tor Books, Hardcover, 383 pages, \$25.95), a veteran Hard Science Fiction author takes direct aim at the

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The answer, in the case of Poul Anderson and *Starfarers*, is yes.

Stories of mankind's expansion into interstellar space can be seen as falling into two basic categories: those stories where man is the only species of space-faring intelligent life to have evolved in the galaxy, and those where the galaxy is filled (at least sparsely) with technology-using life.

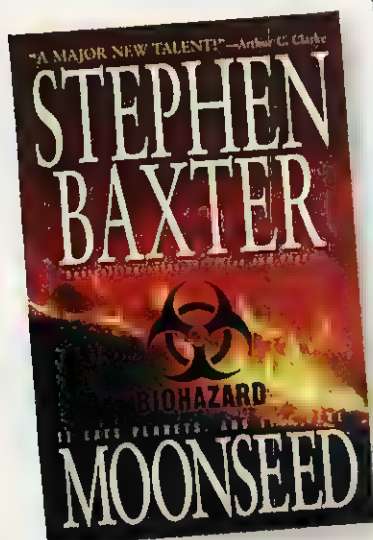
Except for during John W. Campbell's Golden Age of Science Fiction, the latter category has been the more common. But those authors writing Hard SF set in a galaxy with other intelligent life (as opposed to those writing adventure SF with fewer constraints of rigorous logic) must face the question of why we have not been visited by these other beings. In *Starfarers*, Anderson makes a case for a relatively original explanation, using as examples both an intelligent race thousands of light-years away and mankind itself over the coming 10,000 years.

Starfarers is primarily the tale of a group of 10 people—six men and four women—who leave Earth aboard *Envoy*, the one and only starship mankind has built and outfitted for a journey across thousands of light years. Their destination is a region of space where traces can be seen of what can only be interstellar spacecraft. The discovery of the “zero-zero” drive, which extracts energy from the very fabric of space to allow travel at near light speed, has opened up Earth's galactic neighborhood to exploration and settlement, but travel comes at great cost due to time dilation. Spaceships can travel to the nearest stars in just days or weeks ship-time, but years and decades pass on

Earth and the other star systems. By the time *Envoy* leaves on its monumental journey—planned to take only a few years for the 10 starfarers, but covering more than 10,000 Earth years—those who travel among the stars are already becoming socially estranged from the rest of mankind. During the centuries they are gone, the situation obviously will only get worse. What kind of human society will the crew of *Envoy* find when they return?

Anderson's story of *Envoy* and her crew is compelling, primarily for the scientific wonders they uncover. On such a long journey, they must occasionally turn off their ship's engine to make course corrections, and view their surroundings. As they approach their objective, they note that the number of starship traces in the region is now decreasing. Relatively near their destination, they find a cluster of stars with neutrino sources that can only be small nuclear reactors. They decide to take a side trip to one of the stars in that system, and are met by robot-controlled ships that seek to dismantle *Envoy*, and must be destroyed. On the primary planet in that system, they find plant life from more than one world, and other evidence that starfaring intelligent life had once been there, but are there no more.

They decide to go on nevertheless and get to their destination, the central region of the formerly common starship trails, now gone for centuries. They soon discover that the race of star travelers is now confined to a single



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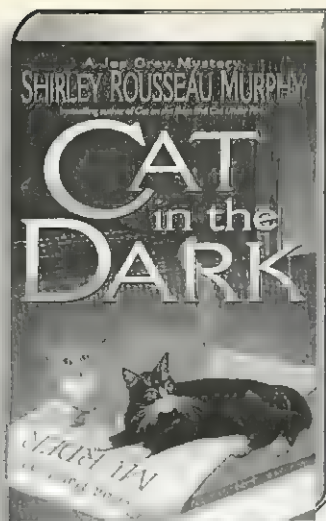
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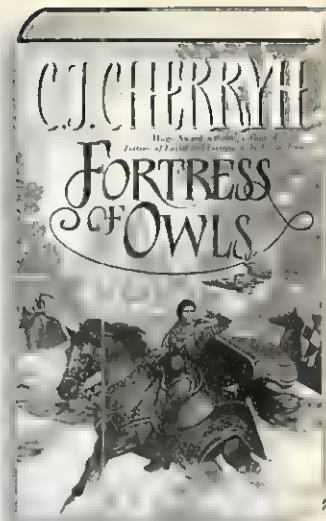
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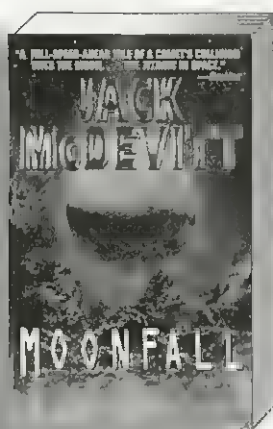
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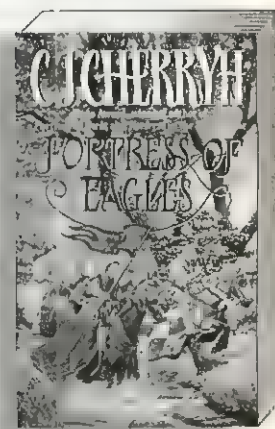
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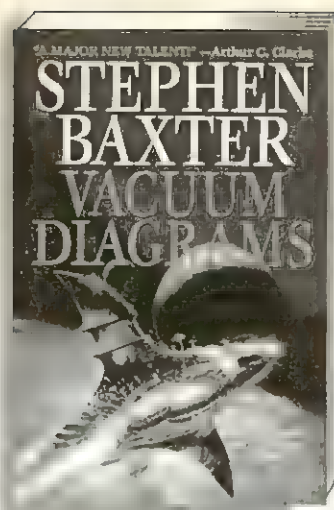


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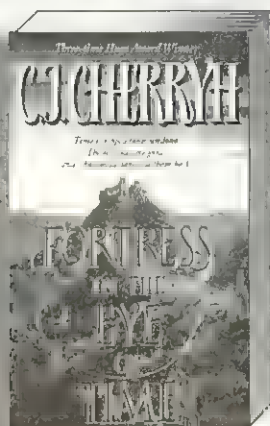
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star system, and their society to a single planet, Tahir. They spend several years developing communications and a common language with the four-legged Tahirians, and learn why they no longer travel among the stars. After a scientific joint expedition to a nearby pulsar that turns to tragedy when one human and one Tahirian are killed, and two of the human crew, who want to return to Earth immediately with their newfound information, mutiny, the *Envoy* and her remaining crew return to Earth to find an Earth with a peaceful human society that has in some ways evolved in parallel to that on Tahir. In the denouement, *Envoy* and her crew must go to other worlds to share the profound new knowledge they have acquired.

Anderson also spends great time and effort to make the crew of *Envoy* distinct individuals, and meets with some success. He manages this despite resorting somewhat to cultural stereotypes in his culturally diverse crew. The captain is an aloof South American aristocrat, his first mate/pilot a Hungarian with military background, the second pilot a likable, headstrong Irish woman, the female head engineer is Chinese, the female physicist is Israeli, the female physicist/biologist is African, the biochemist a Muslim, and the linguist Indian. The second engineer and planetologist are both American males, and they end up causing the most trouble among the crew. (Is there a message from the author here, or just careful political correctness?)

Hard SF is not known for its characterization, so Anderson's extra effort stands out.

One problem with the flow of the novel comes from those few chapters that occur on Earth and its neighboring worlds; these sections are more disjointed and less compelling, and sometimes seem annoying interruptions in the narrative of the *Envoy's* journey. While Anderson had a need to provide some feel for what was happening on Earth during these long periods, it might have been better to tell those sections in a more concise form, instead of interspersing stories of the estranged star travelers (called Kith) that are sometimes hard to follow out of context. The annoyance factor from these interludes is increased by the fact that the *Envoy* story sometimes slowed to a snail's pace as Anderson has his crew talk a little too much with each other about their problems, both personal and professional.

But *Starfarers* is nevertheless exemplary Hard SF, filled with a sense of wonder and real characters, as well as important themes of the type that can only be considered in Science Fiction. It is an admirable combination, and Anderson's novel provides one of the best Hard SF stories so far this year.

D. Douglas Fratz

***Moonseed* by Stephen Baxter.** Harper Prism, 534 pages, \$24.00.

In *Moonseed*, Stephen Baxter offers an alternative cataclysmic scenario to the current

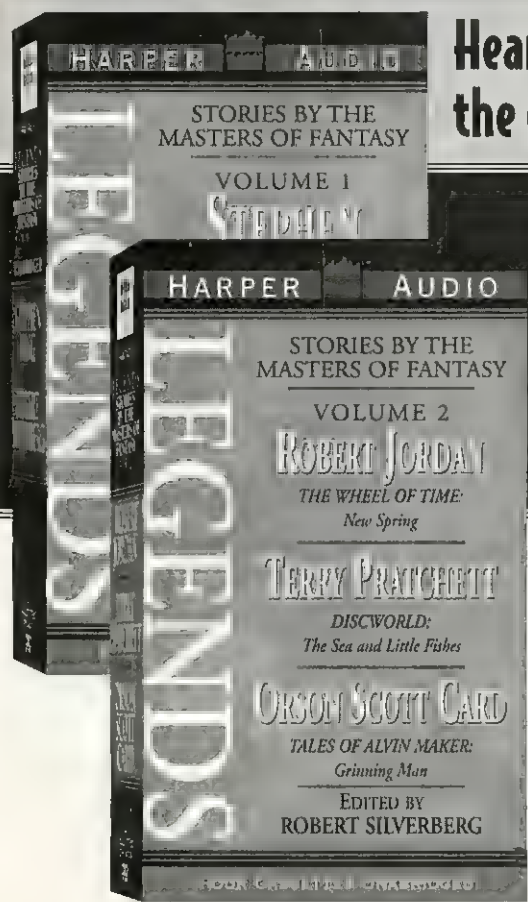
speculations about extinction events. The serious attention now paid to the fate of the dinosaurs seems more immediate than ever before because it's more personal. If a rock fell out of the sky 65 million years ago, large enough to make it through the atmosphere and punch a deep hole in the planet, thus sending up enough debris to block the Sun and kill the flora, not to mention the volcanism it would trigger along with all the other catastrophic changes in the biosphere, and thereby cause the extinction of one of the most successful life forms ever to walk the Earth—what is there to say it won't happen to us? Of course—as Baxter points out in his novel—there was an earlier, worse extinction, the Permian die-off, the cause of which we still don't know. It's not as dramatic as an asteroid smacking into us so it doesn't get the same press.

It seems that the universe around us is not as benign as we once imagined. We've already had near-misses. The Earth is a fragile place.

Moonseed is not, however, about an asteroid. Instead, the menace is literally no greater in size than a grain of sand. That and the math of exponential growth rates, hubris, and lack of imagination.

The novel opens after the "last" Moon landing, *Apollo 18*. Jays Malone finds an interesting rock and brings it back, unlogged, to give it to his daughter, whose name he has written in regolith. Beside that one extra *Apollo* mission, nothing else has changed, and the space

Continued on page 96



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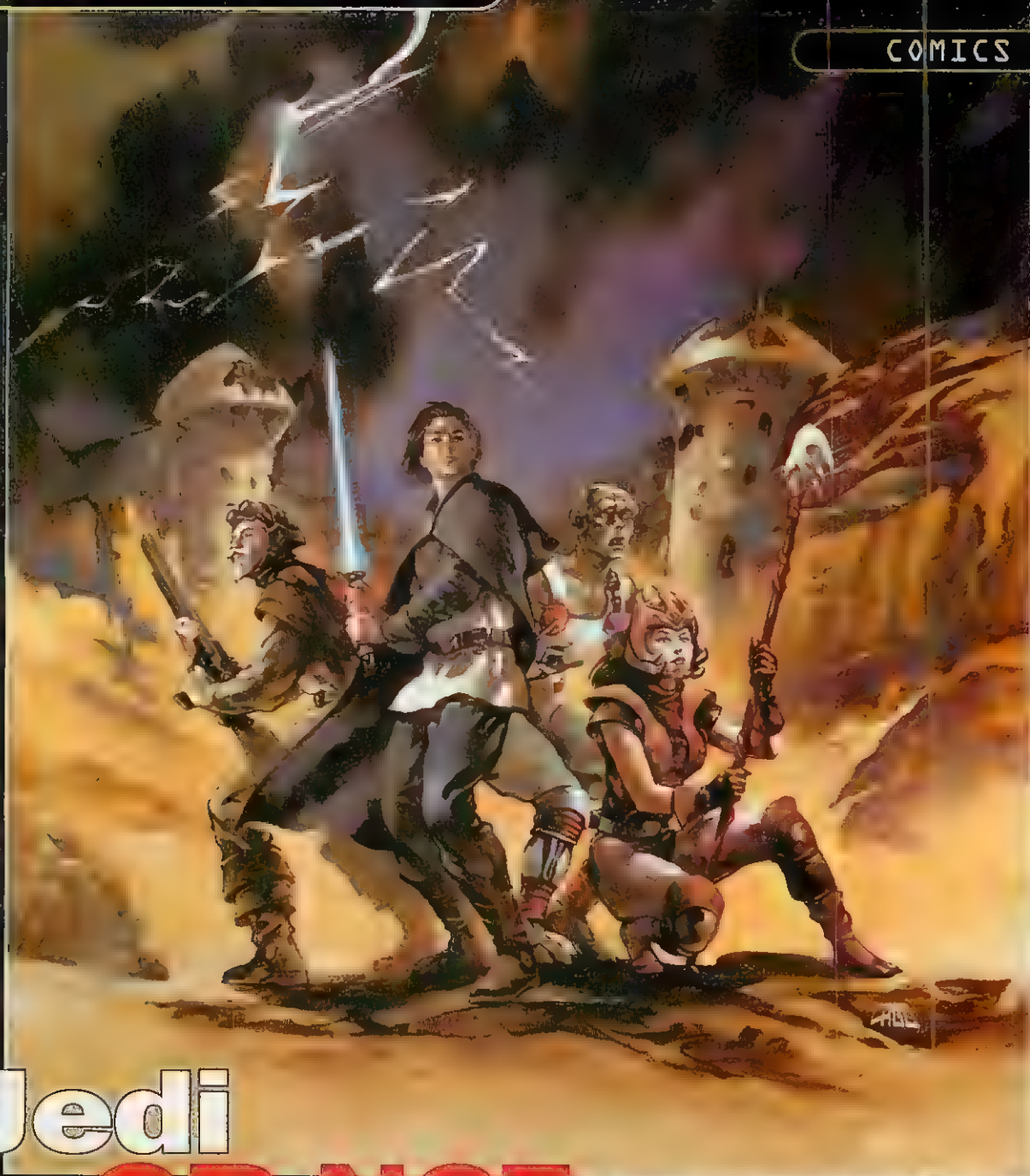


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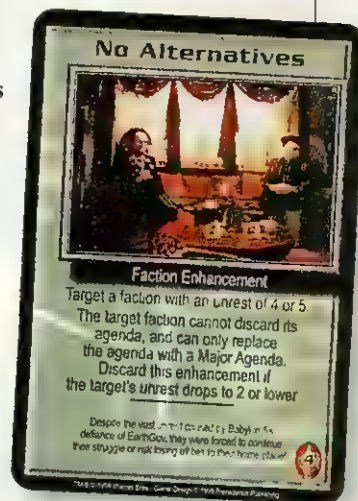
Jedi OR NOT

If you're a patient fan, you'll be able to wait until Memorial Day 1999 to find out what the most famous Jedi Knight of them all, Obi-Wan Kenobi, was like as a child. But who has that kind of patience when it comes to *Star Wars*? Not us. We need a little taste of the Lucas universe to keep us going until the end of May, so we're reading the Dark Horse comic book miniseries that chronicles the adventures of a whole new set of young Jedi in training—*Star Wars: Jedi Academy: Leviathan*. Writer Kevin J. Anderson, penciller Dario Carrasco, Jr., and inker Mark Heike set their tale eight years after the destruction of the Empire. Luke Skywalker has trained a new group of Jedi who, on completion of their training, must go out and aid those in need, using the light side of the Force for the greater good of the universe. When Chief of State Leia Organa Solo receives a distress call from the miners on Corbos, Luke sends his greatest student, Kyp Durrone, to investigate the matter. On the storm-swept Corbos, Kyp must delve alone in the deep caverns of an empty mining colony on a quest to not only solve the mystery of the missing miners, but also to stop the inexplicable haunting voices in his head. This four-issue mini-series features stunning cover art by Ray Lago, as seen above. Each 32-page, full-color issue is only \$2.95, and is guaranteed to contain enough blaster-toting, light saber-wielding, bad guy butt-stomping action to get you through til the release of *Star Wars: Episode I*. Available in finer comic shops everywhere.

SHADOWS BOXING

Babylon 5, J. Michael Straczynski's magnificent five-year novel for television, is drawing to its planned finale, but that doesn't mean that the forces he set in motion will soon come to a conclusion. There is a war on the horizon, one that the Babylunatics at Precedence Publishing will be glad to arm you for. The Shadows have returned in 12-card booster packs that are suitable for any race and will aid and expand your current starter packs. Now Humans, Narns, Centauri, and Minbari can have the force of the Shadows at their side—if they dare. A new and even more deadlier Shadow War is being waged. Will you be victorious? Or will you be crushed under the weight of the enemy? "As the Vorlons strive to bring order, so do the Shadows spread chaos, destroying the

faith and loyalties of those who are their targets." So reads the "Seeds of Anarchy" card from the recently released *Babylon 5* collectible card game booster pack called *The Shadows*. Use that chaos to change the tides of war, and for the suggested retail price of \$2.75, you can afford to gain the upper hand. Remember—any war can be won if you play your cards right. For more information, visit the manufacturer by pointing your Web browser to www.eternity.com.



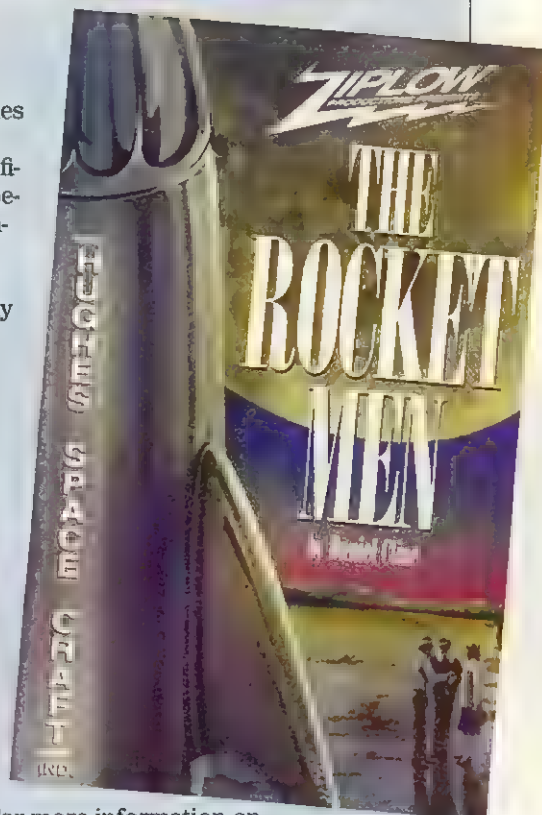
Head SPACE

Not all good Science Fiction comes only in the form of the written word. Ziplow Productions and The Hilton Head Island Repertory Company definitely have an aural fixation, and they're doing their best to bring back the experiences of old-time radio, reinvented for the new millennium, with their continuing series of full-cast audio theater productions. Daniel Cline's *The Rocket*

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John DeChancie's novel *Innerverse*, originally published by Avon Books, has jumped from your eyes to your ears as well. *Innerverse* considers the possibilities of a nation controlled from within by nanotechnology, where feelings can be monitored and antisocial thought or behavior immediately punished. Frank Sutter's mission is to find the answers to The Republic of Innerverse's secrets of mind control and return to what remains of the United States of Central America. For more information on these tapes—which have won the Company the *Publishers Weekly* "Listen Up" Award for best Science Fiction audio—call Ziplow Productions at 1-888-71-SCI-FI for a free catalog.

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NEW ON VIDEO

Beware—The following flicks are hurtling toward your video store with the speed of an asteroid:

GODZILLA: The sleek, speedy Godzilla did not fare as well at the box office as some had hoped, perhaps because we didn't get the lumbering giant we all know and love. Childhood memories are awfully hard to erase. Matthew Broderick and Hank Azaria got an A for effort, but fans and critics alike hailed this as the cinematic version of New Coke. If you're looking for plot or character to care about, go elsewhere, but if you can stop thinking so hard you might enjoy the exceptional special effects.

THE X-FILES: The truth is out there about the success of the big-screen transition of Chris Carter's cult conspiracy classic—it opened at #1 at the box office and got both thumbs up from those two guys in Chicago. Starring Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny as the couple for whom a kiss is still almost a kiss. Also featuring the usual gang of suspects: The Cigarette-Smoking Man,

the Lone Gunmen, among others. The video not only contains previously unreleased footage, but also behind-the-scenes interviews with both Carter and Anderson.

DEEP IMPACT and **ARMAGEDDON:** Together, these two films make a perfect weekend double feature, as the Earth is doubly threatened by a pair of massive meteors. But

METEORIC MOVIES

which to watch first? *Armageddon*'s Bruce Willis, Liv Tyler, and Ben Affleck? Or *Deep Impact*'s Morgan Freeman, Tea Leoni, and Robert Duvall? Each did surprisingly well at the box office, considering fears that whichever one got to the theaters first would destroy the competition. Synergy is the word of the day for these meteor movies.

SMALL SOLDIERS: A monstrous mistake installs defense industry computer chips into commando action figures, creating a flick that is like *Toy Story* on steroids. DreamWorks combined live action with animation, using the voices of Tommy Lee Jones, Ernest Borgnine, Dennis Leary and the late Phil Hartman. Directed by Joe Dante (*Gremlins*).

THE AVENGERS: Move over, Diana Rigg! Step aside Patrick MacNee! A new dynamic duo is in town. Uma Thurman and Ralph Fiennes step into the roles of Emma Peel and John Steed. Sean Connery moves over to the dark side and uses his license to kill in an attempt to rule the world, and only the reinvented Avengers can stop him.



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By Michael A. Burstein

Science Fiction says farewell to the cosmic triumph that was *Babylon 5*.



President John Sheridan and Captain Elizabeth Lochley (Bruce Boxleitner and Tracy Scoggins, above) look grim, as if they've heard the news—*Babylon 5* (below) is no more.

IT TRULY IS THE END OF AN ERA. Five years ago, in January 1993, a new syndicated television show hit the airwaves. A two-hour pilot movie, *Babylon 5: The Gathering*, introduced television viewers to a space station where humanity and four alien races had agreed to attempt to keep the peace.

Five years later, it has certainly been an exciting ride. The Shadow War, the fight to reclaim Earth, the problems with telepaths, revelations about the Vorlons—all these aspects of the *Babylon 5* universe have intrigued us for all this time. Science fiction fandom took the show to heart, awarding two episodes of *Babylon 5*—"The Coming of Shadows" and "Severed Dreams"—the Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation, choosing to honor these episodes over high-budget movies and old, science fiction favorites.

I personally remember how I got involved in watching

Babylon 5. My first exposure to it was a clip of a rotating space station made on a NewTek Video Toaster, a software and hardware package designed to create professional-quality special effects at home. That initial clip wasn't very impressive, to be honest, but the fact that a science fiction television show was being produced by a man who under-

stood the need to rotate a space station for artificial gravity—that impressed me. And even before the show was in production, that led me to want to find out as much about the show as I could. Which, in turn, led me to the Internet, where the producer of the show, J. Michael Straczynski (also known as JMS and just plain Joe), held court about his vision, which was much appreciated by the small group of us who were interested.

As the show continued, that group increased in size. Those who followed Joe's reports from behind the scenes on the on-line services and the Internet remember the uncertainty that gripped us when renewal season came along. Probably this was most intense at the end of season 4, when the cast and crew were so sure of imminent cancellation that they made a point of filming the story epilogue, "Sleeping in Light."

And yet, each time, the show got renewed, always in the nick of time. After four seasons of consortium syndication, Turner Network Television picked it up for cable, and Straczynski's full vision could be realized.

But now there is no more uncertainty, no more hope for renewal. With the conclusion of the intended saga, Straczynski has voluntarily brought the series to a conclusion as well. The fans' feelings are, obviously, mixed. On the one hand, we've all seen fictional universes drained of their power over us by one too many trips to the well. But, on the other hand, we hate to see this specific series come to its end, although we all knew it was inevitable.

Some fans have even made *Babylon 5* a major part of their lives. Sandra Bruckner began a monthly electronic newsletter called *The Zocalo*, and a few years later found herself appointed to edit the newsletter of the official fan club, *Universe Today*. She feels that *Babylon 5* has been much more than just another television show.

"I do believe that *Babylon 5* has changed TV—in a rather substantial way. They have shown that doing a science fiction program doesn't have to be terribly expensive. They have brought the use of CGI to new levels—pushing the envelope on elements that used to be done with models only.

"*B5* has also given creators something to think about—using a continuing arc instead of singular stories week after week. I don't see everyone going this route—it certainly doesn't make the life of the writer for the show any easier—since things have to be integrated, complicating the story and how it can be told.

"Whether the effect of *B5* will grow over time—like *Star Trek*—is uncertain. Given the fact that so many people are



"Vejur requires the carbon units to disclose the information." -T'Pol (Persis Khambatta), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, 1979

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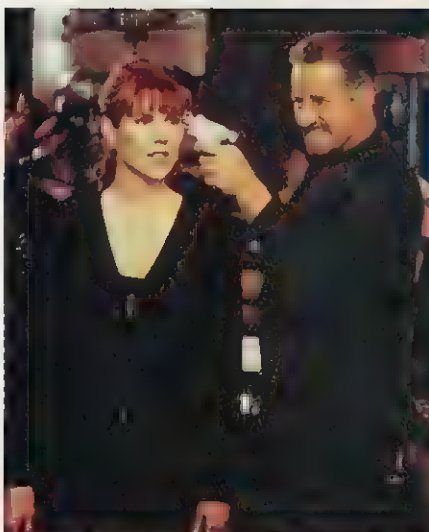
only discovering *B5* through TNT, it will be interesting to watch over the next year or so, particularly as the series comes to an end.

"*Babylon 5* has always been like a visual novel for me. Unlike other novels where you have to imagine what the characters look like, *Babylon 5* gives you those visual aids. But because of its continual story line, it's more like a novel than a TV series. In comparing a novel to a script, you have the same problems of bringing characters to life, but with TV you have a more physical manifestation of the written word.

"I love the story—or more specifically—the characters of the story. I've always been a person to get involved with the characters I visit each week on a TV show. For me to continue to watch, the show has to make me think—and the characters have to make me feel as well. *Babylon 5* has done both—on a greater level than anything else before."

Don Kinney, another fan and staff writer for *The Zocalo*, agrees with Bruckner that *Babylon 5* has changed the face of television. "It's a TV show that entertains while it makes you think. Not only with philosophical questions but with quotes, echoes and homages to some of the legends and tropes of SF, fantasy and literature in general."

But *Babylon 5* was also a show that appealed to science fiction writers as well as fans. The story arc gripped many of us in the same way an epic novel would keep us awake for hours on end, desperately turning pages to



Lyta Alexander and John Sheridan (*Patricia Tallman, Boxleitner*) on a bad day.

find out what would happen next.

Ed Bryant is a Nebula Award-winning author and a longtime reviewer in the field, whose latest collection of short stories is *Flirting with Dead*. He is also a longtime fan of *Babylon 5*, who sees in the show the best of science fiction, in its literary form as well as its media form.

"Joe Straczynski clearly experienced a mis-spent childhood overdosing on all the great—and probably some not so great—science fiction classics. In the *Babylon 5* series, he's

managed to communicate that wide-eyed sense of cosmic wonder. Part of the true value of the series is the texture it brings to TV science fiction. There's a real sense of politics and economics, sociology and diverse cultures that beats out the television competition. Straczynski makes his future universe seem complicated and lived-in by people (or non-humans) with real motivations and agendas. It's this sort of complexity that allows *B5* to compete on many levels with print science fiction."

Bryant credits the quality of the show very specifically to Straczynski. This definitely differentiates *Babylon 5* from a lot of other science fiction television, where one voice usually gets lost among all the others. "I don't know that *Babylon 5* will really change television—since the Straczynski approach is to implement his own distinctive vision, the sensibility of a lone creative artist with talent and toughness who can gather around him a full team of like-minded colleagues. In this regard, I think it was a terrific move to bring in a Yoda-like consultant such as Harlan Ellison."

Finally, Bryant is philosophical about the end of the series. "I have to admit I'm actually glad that the series per se will end. The creator's given his show the story arc of an epic novel, and dramatic progression dictates that all good things have to climax and end. Any regret I might have at registering its end is mitigated by the knowledge that Joe Straczynski will continue with other televised

Continued on page 88

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By Eric Kotani, Geoffrey A. Landis, and Charles Sheffield

Here comes the Sun—and contrary to the Beatles song, it might *not* be all right.



ABOVE: The solar-powered satellite of fiction, beaming plentiful power to an energy-starved world. Art by Doug Andersen. BELOW: The solar-powered future of science fact, per NASA.

SOLAR POWER FROM SPACE: IS IT AN IDEA WHOSE time has come? Or is it a technological dinosaur that can't be killed? The prospects of collecting unlimited, free solar power in space and beaming it to the ground to solve the energy problems of the Earth has fascinated engineers and SF writers ever since it was proposed by Peter Glaser in 1968. Gerard K. O'Neill saw building solar power satellites as the *raison d'être* for building colonies in space; Robert Forward saw them as the power sources for interstellar missions. But other scientists disagree, offering the opinion that beaming power from space would be a technological boondoggle, a solution that wouldn't work to a problem that doesn't need solving. To probe this question, we gathered three of SF's most notable scientists.

Under his other name of Yoji Kondo, SF writer Eric Kotani does groundbreaking work in astrophysics and space science. He was director of a satellite observatory for a decade and a half, served as president of the Commission on Astronomy from Space, and holds a joint appointment at NASA and as professor at the Catholic University of America. His latest novel with John Maddox Roberts, *Legacy of Prometheus* (just completed), is a

near-future adventure about the struggle to build the first industrial solar-power satellites. Charles Sheffield is well known to SF readers as an award-winning science fiction writer. In his alternate life as a scientist, he is a past-president of the American Astronautical Society, chief scientist of Earth Satellite Corporation, and a frequent contributor to the *SF Age Science Forum*. His most recent novels are *Aftermath* (Bantam Books, 1998) and *The Cyborg from Earth* (Tor Books, 1998). Geoffrey A. Landis is familiar to Science Forum readers. When not working on science fiction, his main area of expertise is in developing advanced solar cells and conducting research on solar-power systems for space. Over the past two years he has been a participant in the "Fresh Look" study that re-evaluated solar-power satellites for NASA.

LANDIS: The idea of a solar-power satellite beaming power back to "rectenna" arrays on Earth to solve Earth's energy problems has been a popular object in SF the past few decades.

SHEFFIELD: Although there were proposals in the 1950s to beam energy to Earth by reflecting sunlight from giant space mirrors, the modern concept of a solar-power satellite (SPS) was proposed by Peter Glaser in 1968. The idea is simple: a large orbiting solar array, several kilometers across, converts sunlight into electricity to produce a microwave beam. This is focused onto receivers (a "rectenna," also several kilometers across) on the Earth, to generate electricity to feed into the electric grid.

LANDIS: Do you think that this is really practical?

KOTANI: Until it has been tried out, we will not know if SPS is a workable solution to the world energy problem. On the other hand, there is very little choice in the matter—unless we are prepared to accept a future with declining energy resources, especially if we are trying to bring the living standard of the developing world in line with the developed world.

SHEFFIELD: The question is not, Would it work? If we agree to start small, and build up later to large arrays, I would say it certainly works technically. However, the real question is, Would anyone in their right mind try that as a method to solve Earth's energy problems? I say they would not. The construction of something that size—kilometers



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across—in high orbit, when we are having trouble putting modest structures into low orbit, indicates that SPS is a project not for the next half-century, but perhaps a century and a half out. That would not be a big objection, except that I cannot imagine we will not have much better energy-raising methods (such as controlled fusion) in 150 years.

LANDIS: But I am not at all convinced that fusion is going to happen. It has been touted as the energy supply of the future for nearly 50 years, but we seem to be no closer to a practical fusion energy source than we were 50 years ago. If we are to solve the Earth's energy problems, and do so without completely destroying the environment of the planet we live on, it seems very likely to me that we will need some kind of solar power system. Space solar power could be it.

SHEFFIELD: We would build fusion reactors rather than using solar power for two reasons. First, sunlight is a highly diffuse energy source unless you get very close to the Sun. The whole history of energy shows that we move in the direction of more compact power sources—oil is more intense and compact than water or wind, nuclear more compact and intense than chemical. The other reason is that the Sun, unlike our future fusion reactors, was not designed to fit in with the rest of our energy uses and needs.

KOTANI: We have no guarantee that controlled fusion will become available before we start running out of energy on the ground.

SHEFFIELD: Admittedly, we don't have controlled fusion yet—but we also can't build an SPS yet. I put the question the other way around: Why build a kilometers-wide array, delicate and cumbersome and vulnerable to micrometeor damage, when you can put the same power-generating capacity into something as small as a school bus?

KOTANI: Economical reusable launch vehicles can reduce the cost of launching payloads into low Earth orbit by an order of magnitude—and eventually by a factor of some one hundred. This can make the electric power from space competitive with that from the ground. The latest estimates of the cost of solar power are in the same range as that from the ground. A recent study in Japan also shows a similar conclusion if the availability of low-cost launches is assumed.

SHEFFIELD: Certainly, we hope and expect that the cost of sending material to space will go down drastically in the next few generations, or even sooner. We also will become increasingly unwilling to pollute the Earth with our power generation. Maybe in two hundred years the idea of power-generation plants near population will be as unacceptable as the Middle Ages habit of allowing the privy to drain into the well. However, I want to emphasize that two-hundred-year-old solutions to our problems today don't seem to work. And we are proposing, for our descendants two hundred years away, our primitive technology as fixes for their problems. I don't

believe they'll listen.

LANDIS: Two hundred years? Two-hundred years ago, the average person's energy supply was horses and kerosene lanterns.

SHEFFIELD: At least a hundred.

LANDIS: Are you really so pessimistic about space solar power?

SHEFFIELD: We have come a long way in 200 years, and I hope we'll go as far again in the next 200. But I don't see us going toward SPS. Let me suggest some other reasons why. We are assuming that energy needs will continue to rise and rise. I don't think that is true. We have not yet begun to scratch the surface of fuel efficiency and conservation. And, my main reason for thinking we will not come to rely on SPS is precisely because I believe that we *will* advance a great deal in the next century or two. In fact, we will advance to the point where solar power will be a quaint idea from the 20th century, but one so far from fitting with the science and technology of the times that no one seriously considers it.

KOTANI: An initial SPS program may be started at about \$5B—as compared to the 1979 study which gave that figure as \$250B. The reduction in the estimated cost is not just lower launch costs, but also includes lighter and more efficient solar cells and other technological innovations. And SPS orbits need not all be geosynchronous. Sun-facing polar low Earth orbit, and medium Earth orbits are now real possibilities. A 0.4 gigawatt SPS could be built for \$5B now.

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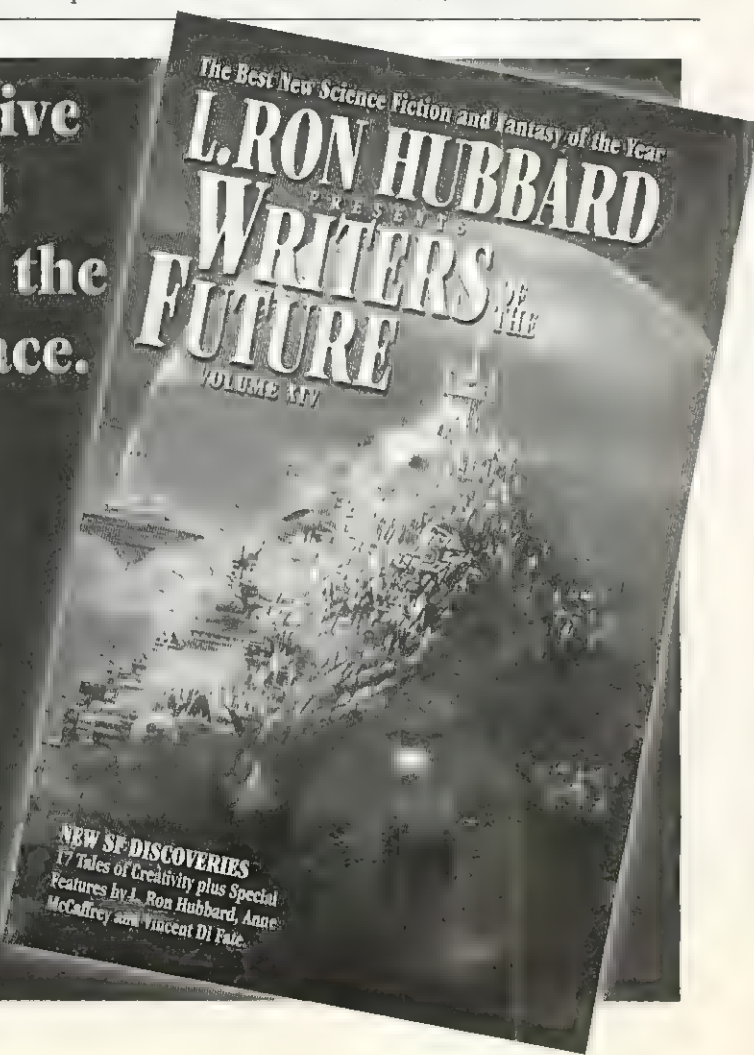
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LANDIS: I disbelieve that figure. Where do you get your numbers?

KOTANI: That number comes from the latest study conducted at NASA.

LANDIS: Depends on who's doing the estimating, and what assumptions they use.

SHEFFIELD: But we all know that paper studies often diverge widely from reality. Recall the euphoria for nuclear power plants in the 1940s, "electricity too cheap to meter." And that was for something we had a lot more experience with than the construction of monster space structures.

LANDIS: Eric said that SPS orbits need not all be geosynchronous, that Sun-facing polar low orbits are now real possibilities. I'd like to respectfully disagree with that one. Sure, you could put a solar power satellite into a lower orbit, such as a Sun-synchronous polar orbit. But that's a really bad place to put such a satellite. This was one of the options looked at in the NASA "Fresh Look" study, and it turns out that a solar-power satellite is nearly useless in low orbits. The problem is that in a low orbit, the satellite is in view of the ground station only for a few minutes a day.

KOTANI: Their answer appears to be that we can place a large number of solar-power satellites in low orbit so that we have a continuous supply of energy.

LANDIS: If you look at that concept, you will quickly see that to make it work, you will have to have hundreds of satellites, most of which are in positions where the only part of the Earth they can see is either ocean, wastelands, or the polar regions. It is unbelievably inefficient—you need to have about 10 or 20 times as much power in orbit as you need.

KOTANI: I don't know if the low-orbit concept will really work. I only mentioned it as a starting point. There can be receiving stations in numerous locations if it is planned as a global project.

LANDIS: The real problem with SPS is that, by its nature, it does not scale well to low power levels. The obvious place to put an SPS is not in low orbit, but at geosynchronous orbit 40,000 kilometers away. Any other orbit is very inefficient because the satellite isn't over the ground station.

KOTANI: I readily agree with the advantages of geosynchronous orbit. Besides, I am not advocating the use of low Earth orbit for solar-power satellites. I was simply quoting recent feasibility studies.

LANDIS: I have to admit that I also have studied one other place to put an SPS: not in lower orbit, but actually in *higher* orbit: at the Earth-Sun Lagrange point, 1.1 million kilometers away from the Earth. The interesting thing about the SPS in the Earth-Sun Lagrange point—and I picked L-2, the one that's on the far side of the Earth from the Sun—is that, from the point of view of the Earth, it seems to hover above the dark side of the Earth. Why is that useful? Well, the point is to beam power only to the night side of the Earth and to use solar arrays when the receiver is in sunlight. The SPS fills in for

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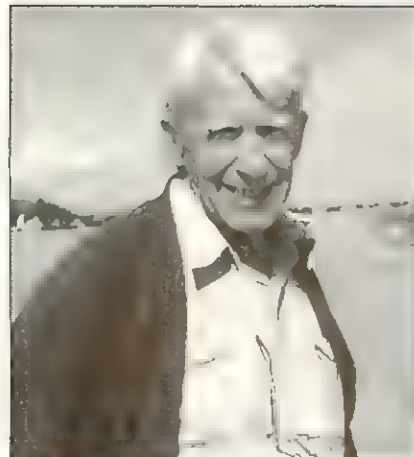
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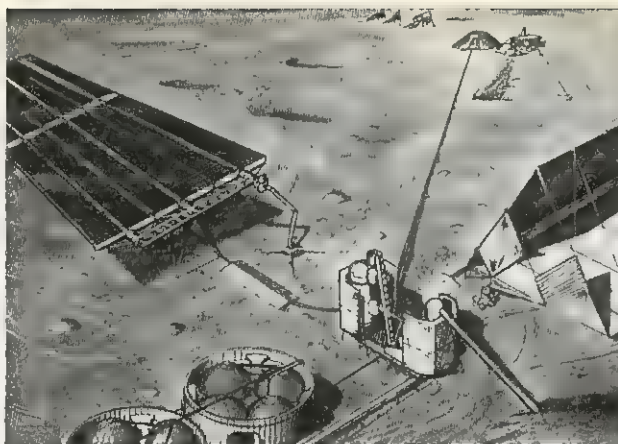
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NASA's vision of a future solar-powered landing module.

when the solar arrays don't produce power. The problem, though, is that the satellite is 1.1 million kilometers away! That's something like 25 times farther away than a satellite in geosynchronous orbit. When you do the numbers on that, you find that the satellite producing power from Earth-Sun L-2 won't be cost effective unless it's absolutely huge. But it does have a clear growth path: First you start with solar power on the Earth, and then you grow to solar power in the sky.

KOTANI: Your SPS will keep changing its position with respect to the rectenna on the ground. Besides, it will cost even more to put your SPS there. The Lagrangian point you speak of is not exactly the Lagrangian point of the restricted three-body problem. For one thing, Earth's orbit is eccentric, and for another, the Moon will perturb the stability of such a satellite. I still don't see any advantage for an SPS at such a Lagrangian point.

LANDIS: It's well outside the Moon's orbit, and it turns out that there are halo orbits around the unstable Lagrange points (and L-2 is, in fact, an unstable Lagrange point, unlike L-4 and L-5) that don't take much fuel to maintain. But your point about cost is a tougher issue to deal with.

SHEFFIELD: Two points, first, is it easy to achieve good beam collimation over the distances we are talking about? If not, then how do we deliver the power to where we want it? Second, when you put the SPS that far out, you raise the bar in terms of both the cost and the technological difficulty.

KOTANI: You're assuming, Geoffrey, that all the consuming societies have enough land areas to invest in building the ground-based solar array and that they need not worry about weather conditions—cloud coverages—there. That's the reason why solar-power satellites are being considered in preference to ground-based solar arrays as an option for a number of countries.

SHEFFIELD: If we beam much more energy down to Earth than we are currently using (factors of 10 or a hundred) then we have to decide where the waste heat will go.

KOTANI: You're right, in the long run, we can't keep pumping down more energy to Earth than we are receiving now without pay-

ing the price in accordance with the law of thermodynamics.

LANDIS: The waste heat issue really isn't a real problem. If you compare the energy from solar-power satellites to the solar energy hitting the Earth, which comes to somewhat over a hundred million gigawatts, the SPS contribution is negligible.

KOTANI: I know that. That's why I said "in the long run." Very long.

SHEFFIELD: I'll buy the fact that the waste energy argument is not valid. I don't remember if that was pointed out back when the issue was first raised—remember, this discussion has been going on since the 'sixties.

LANDIS: If the heat balance of the Earth is a major concern, SPS is almost certainly the best energy alternative, since every other power source you can think of rejects its waste heat from primary conversion on Earth—SPS rejects its waste heat in space, and the conversion apparatus here on the Earth is very efficient. Not to mention the fact that it doesn't produce carbon dioxide, which is far worse than waste heat in terms of the energy balance of the Earth.

SHEFFIELD: Yes, Earth-based systems are worse than SPS for waste heat disposal. But hydroelectric is good from this point of view, and of course space-based controlled fusion plants are even better.

KOTANI: Why would we want to build a controlled fusion reactor in space when there is already an operating system that's free? On the other hand, improving the standard of living has meant thus far a greater consumption of energy. If the developing world is to improve its "standard" of living, it will be consuming a lot more energy.

LANDIS: Improving the standard of living in the developing world is, in my opinion, of tremendous importance. Sociologists have found that there's a clear link between high population growth and low standards of living. If we're worried about the Earth getting crowded—and it seems clear that we can't continue exponential population growth indefinitely—then we've got to improve conditions in the Third World.

SHEFFIELD: It was suggested that an SPS would be great for providing energy to Africa, where, as you point out, the energy costs are high. Suppose that you put an SPS in geostationary orbit and beamed down, say, five gigawatts. Now, you could generate that much energy by building a dam on the Congo River, where it drops sharply from Kinshasa to the Atlantic. So ask yourself which you would prefer if you were an African. Would you like an SPS, providing power from a

Continued on page 87

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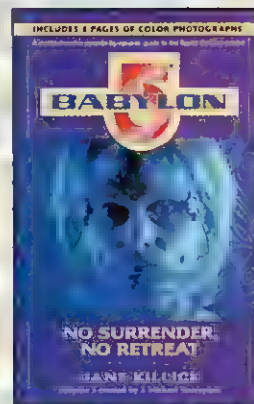
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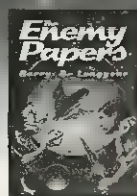
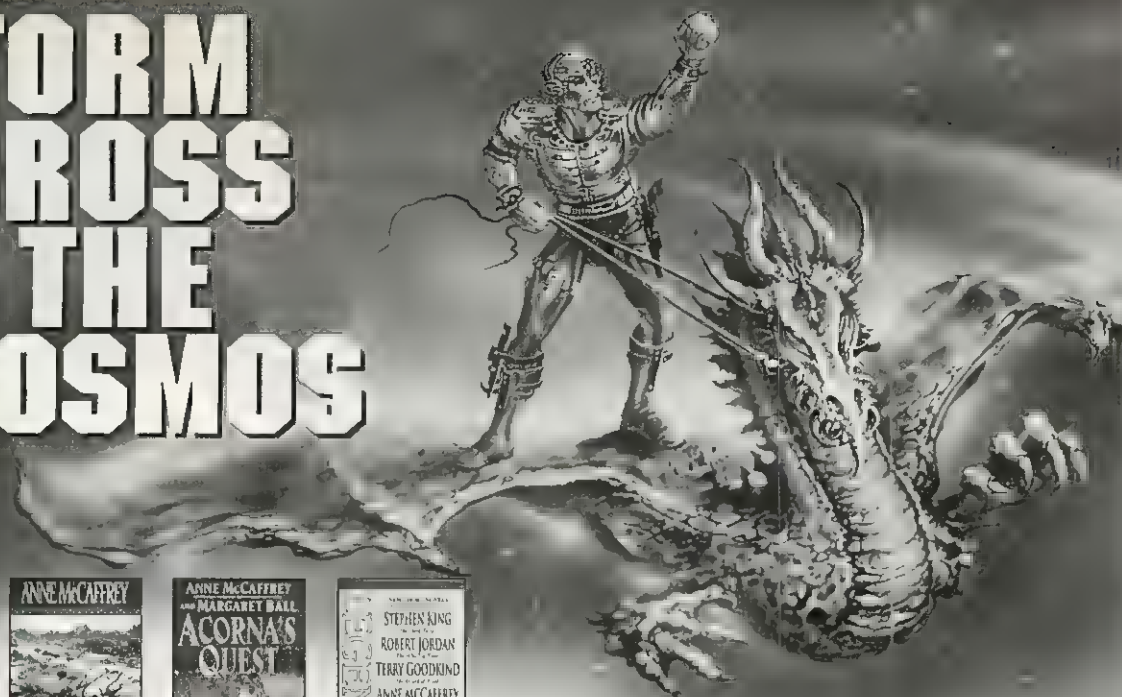


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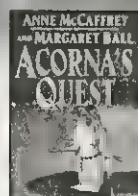
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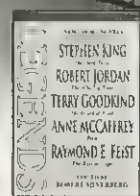
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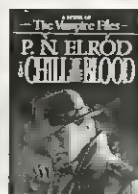
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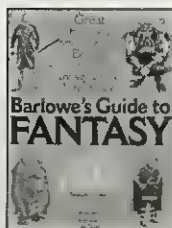
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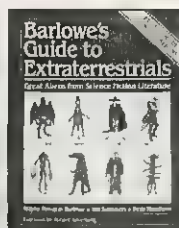
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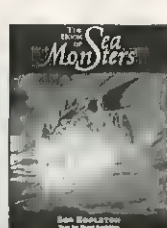
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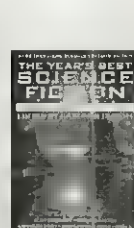
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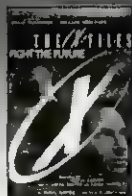
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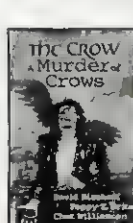
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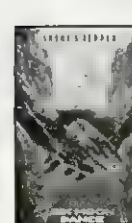
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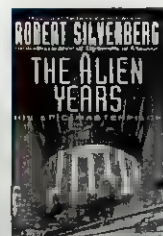
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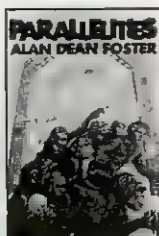
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REXITOS

Something terrible has been reborn in South America.
Something ancient and strong—and hungry!

IF THIS ISN'T COCAINE, WHAT IS IT?" HERNAN SAID, holding up one of the round, plastic-wrapped packets and rolling it in his fingers.

Miguelito frowned and grunted. His scalp tightened, causing his Argentine hair plugs to bunch up. The muscles on his thick neck tightened, putting a dangerous strain on his delicate gold chains and causing some of the networks of funny, spidery veins that stuck out all over his body to pulse frantically.

"It's something new, different," he finally said. "You got a problem with it?"

Miguelito's thug, Segundo, spread his purple lips to reveal teeth blackened by a lifetime of chewing raw coca leaves, and leaned toward Hernan. Steroid-enhanced muscles quivered out of a Tazmanian Devil T-shirt that was cut up to show the thug's physique. For an Indio who was not quite five feet tall he could be intimidating.

Hernan noted the grim expressions on Miguelito's and Segundo's faces. He glanced around the grungy, Bogotá hotel room, inhaled the air that reeked of stale bodily secretions and disinfectant, and listened to the moaning and bumping leaking in from the next room that could have been the result of torture, a sex act, or some combination of both.

"No," he said, "it's not a problem. I was just curious, that's all."

"We don't pay you to ask questions," Miguelito said. "Look, kid, you've done this before. With that light skin and those blue eyes of yours, and the way you can speak English, you don't get bothered. So the packets don't look the same this time—so what? They're smaller—they'll be easier to get down, and they won't rip you open when they come out."

"It's just that I can't help wondering about it," Hernan wrapped his fingers around the packet. "I've just got that kind of mind."

"Thinking can get you into trouble in this business." Miguelito looked dead serious.

Then a buzzer went off. Segundo looked at his complex high-tech watch, pressed a tiny button with the corner of a fingernail, and the buzz stopped. He said something to his boss. It wasn't in Spanish or English.

"Yes, Segundo," Miguelito said, "go ahead."

Segundo's blackened teeth flashed again. He turned on the battered, bolted-down television set.

"He's hooked on a telenovella." Miguelito looked sheepish for few seconds, then frowned again. "Get to it, Hernan."

The noise in the next room stopped. There was the sound of another television set coming on.

Hernan took one last look at the packet he was holding. Under the wrapping it was kind of leathery, and the inside was soft. It was kind of like turtle or snake eggs. It would be easier to swallow than the cocaine packets or the whole, hard-boiled eggs he practiced on.

Before the telenovella started there was a short news segment with the new info-babe who was Hernan's favorite now that Greta Franco was getting old.

Miguelito threw a plastic bag at Hernan with eleven more of the strange packets in it. "And the rest," he said, not looking at all patient.

Hernan swallowed them, one by one. It took most of his concentration. He only caught random words from the news segment. An unfamiliar one stuck in his mind.

"What are rexitos?" he asked after swallowing the last packet.

"I don't know," Miguelito said, looking irritated, "probably a new kind of fast food or something."

Segundo ignored them both. He was absorbed in the telenovella. Are the young lovers really brother and sister? Will the *brujos* use their computers to put a curse on the rich fam-

BY ERNEST HOGAN
Illustration By David Beck

The last thing she remembered hearing him

ily? What will the woman with the acid-scarred face do next? Is the hermaphrodite pregnant? Will the heart transplant result in the transfer of souls?

Inside Herman's digestive tract, the packets felt as if they were getting warmer.

It only bothered him for a little while. Soon his eyes were locked onto the telenovella—the actress playing the heroine was a real sex-bomb. His mind drifted to the future, when he would be on a plane taking him north, to the other America where, after making his delivery in the bathroom of an airport hotel that would be much cleaner and nicer than this one, he would be turned loose with 50,000 American dollars in small, unmarked bills. Sexy American girls were impressed by that kind of money. Hell, he may even check out Disney World while he is there—he had heard that it wasn't far from the airport.

All the while, the things inside him got warmer.

IT WAS LIKE SOMETHING FROM A BAD MEXICAN ACTION FILM, Greta Franco thought. After the mayhem, she was kidnapped, bound, gagged, and drugged. Then she woke up, wearing what looked like a prison uniform, in a windowless room. It looked like some kind of office. The smell was that of a hospital. She was on a cot. The door was locked. There was no bathroom, but there was a large plastic bucket.

Eventually, the door opened, and in walked a masked man in a three-piece suit. It was the sort of mask worn by superhero wrestlers like Santo and Blue Demon in awful, old Mexican movies. No doubt he would be followed by rubber-faced monsters and raygun-toting miniskirted mamas.

As Buck McCalla would say, "Twenty-first century Latin America—ya gotta love it!"

She wondered what had happened to him. Her last coherent memory was of Buck running away with his pants ripped to shreds. That was after the rexitos went berserk...

"Greetings, Ms. Franco," the masked man said, in very proper Castilian Spanish, "I hope our accommodations have been satisfactory."

She looked at the bucket. "Rather primitive in some ways."

He laughed. "This facility had to be constructed fast. This spot was virgin rain forest just a few days ago. We almost nuked the area, leaving it like Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, except with radioactive fallout and genetic mutations. It would have been interesting, but these rexitos are just too promising..."

"Wonderful." She frowned, not sure what to make of his literary allusion.

"Yes, it is too bad about the damage to the ecosystem, but an astute journalist like yourself must realize that this situation required immediate action."

She looked into the steel-gray eyes through the mask. "Just who the hell are you?"

That made him frown. He reached into his jacket and pulled a gaudy, customized 9mm with a laser sight from his shoulder holster. Turning on the laser, he made a little red spot of light dance on Greta's forehead.

"I was hoping that you'd be more readily cooperative. Now, here are the rules: I ask the questions—you provide the answers."

She sighed. This guy must have grown up on Mexican action films.

"You can put the toy away. I'll talk."

The red spot vanished.

"Very good, Ms. Franco. When did you first hear about the rexitos?"

THEY WEREN'T CALLED REXITOS WHEN GRETA FIRST HEARD ABOUT them from her producer. It was just a dumb lead about something weird happening in an Upper Amazon mountain village. Featherless roosters tearing thoroughbred champions to ribbons at cockfights.

Nothing to get excited about, just like the other sleaze assignments

she always got: sightings of the infamous chupacabra monster, lunatics who pour milk into bowls of live cockroaches and eat them for the cameras, UFO cults that are never quite apocalyptic enough for her audience, mad cosmetologists with new infernal devices to enhance beauty and increase the human life span, stubby-legged freak cats that were supposed to be half-rabbit, a religious fanatic who cries jagged shards of glass, a "human bee" who secretes honey from a hole in her neck, a "horse boy" with legs bent the wrong way, tribal witch doctors who claim they can cure cancer and AIDS, American and European cloning and genetic-engineering researchers—outlawed by their own governments—relocating in Latin America, and those ever-popular manifestations of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

It was all in a day's work on the international Mundovision network's *Hoy y Más Alla* (*Today and Beyond*).

And as her producer said: "Look, Greta, our viewers from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska love these stories, and our researchers tell us that most of the audience gets impatient when the correspondent is a woman of your ... maturity. Not that you've let yourself go, sweetheart. And I wouldn't have the finest plastic surgeon in Venezuela touch that face of yours, but then they're doing sensational things with breast implants these days. With bigger breasts, tight sweaters, low-cut blouses, and maybe the occasional bikini top, we could think about having you do some more serious journalism."

But she couldn't see herself interviewing presidents, captains of industry, Nobel-prize-winning authors, artists, guerrilla leaders, drug lords, or even popular entertainers with gigantic artificial boobs getting in the way. Journalism was something she took too seriously for that. So bring on the featherless roosters! Even if her story was ridiculous, she would have some dignity.

As that maniac Buck McCalla would say, "Twenty-first century Latin America—ya gotta love it!"

When she and her cameraman Wifredo—

"WIFREDO!" SHE SUDDENLY SAID, INTERRUPTING HER OWN NARRATIVE. "What happened to him?" The last thing she remembered about him was hearing him scream. And scream. And scream.

The masked man looked impatient, and gestured at her with the gun. "I said I will ask the questions!"

She gave him her most ferocious look. "My cameraman, Wifredo! He was with us when it all went crazy. Where is he? Do you have him here?"

Lowering the gun and smiling, the masked man said, "It will be hard to tell. A lot of the bodies are difficult to identify."

Greta made a sound like she was just kicked in the stomach.

"Continue with your story." The masked man raised his gun again.

Somehow, after some heavy breathing, she did.

WHEN SHE AND HER CAMERAMAN WIFREDO PULLED OFF THE dirt road that had become a mud road that threatened to melt into the jungle, into the remote Colombian village of Aguadura, they actually heard someone say, in a loud, booming, very North American voice, "Twenty-first century Latin America—ya gotta love it!"

Greta and Wifredo exchanged looks of stunned surprise.

"No," she said, "it couldn't be!"

"How the hell?" Wifredo said.

The North American voice then switched from uncultured English to a kind of Spanish that cowboys in Hollywood Westerns would speak when trying to woo "seenyereedas."

"Oh no!" Wifredo got a death grip on the steering wheel of the made-in-Brazil Volkswagen van.

"It's him!" Greta slumped down in her seat. "Buck McCalla."

about him was scream. And scream. And scream.

"BUCK MCCALLA," THE MASKED MAN SAID, "THE GONZO PALEONTOLOGIST. WE KNOW OF HIM."

IT WAS EASY TO SPOT THE TALL SUNBURNED ANGLO WITH HIS WILD reddish-brown hair and his beard bristling as if to cast off the excess crazy energy from his brain. His Panama hat, faded Hawaiian shirt, Levis, and tropical-weight combat boots were all grimy, rumpled, and ragged.

He danced around and gestured as he talked to a group of locals who obviously didn't understand a word he was saying.

"I could beat him up," said Wifredo. "Or there's this." He patted the holstered .45 automatic that he always wore when they were out on assignment.

THE .45 DIDN'T DO ANY GOOD WHEN THE REXITOS ATTACKED. Wifredo emptied an entire clip at them, but they were too small, they moved too fast. He may have gotten lucky and made one or two explode into flying red goo, but there were too many of them.

He had another clip in the cargo pocket of his pants. He never had time to get to it.

This was all before he started screaming.

THE GOGGLE-LIKE SUNGLASSES THAT BUCK MCCALLA WORE HAD flashed as he smiled, big-time.

"It's too late," said Greta. "He's spotted us."

Soon he had them cornered in their own van.

"Greta! Wifredo! I'm so glad the press is here to document this great scientific discovery!" He had switched to his very American English.

"It can't be that great if you're any part of it," Greta said as she got out of the van. "I've always considered you more in the tradition of P.T. Barnum than that of Albert Einstein!"

"Scientists these days should stop pissing and moaning as they beg for handouts from governments and corporations, and follow the example of *that* great American!" Buck took off his hat and looked skyward. "Some day, good old P.T. will be declared a saint. Either on Mars or somewhere here in South America!"

"Should I bother to set up the camera?" asked Wifredo, who still had one hand on the steering wheel and the other near his .45, "or is this just more of your nonsense?"

"Believe me," Buck put his hat over his heart. "This is real. And it's gonna be big! Real big!"

"Is this like your ruins of the lost colony of Atlantis?" asked Greta. "Lemuria," he corrected.

"Or the Nazi scientists who were supposed to have developed an immortality serum? Or that human/dolphin fetus in a jar you claimed to have stolen from a secret laboratory? Or the giant, mutant, garbage-eating rats that you claimed could do simple mathematics?"

"What can I say?" Buck grinned. "I'm a hopeless optimist. El Dorado is just around the corner! And besides, a boy's gotta fund his research somehow."

"OK, so —" Greta rubbed her temples, fighting off a headache. "So some of these mountain *cholos* find out that roosters get mad and fight better if you pluck their feathers?"

"No, there are definite anatomical differences."

"Heaven help me!" Greta turned away in disgust. "So they're deformed! If only I could manage to live out the rest of my life without seeing another two-headed calf!"

"As far as I'm concerned, the more freaks—the better!" said Buck, happily. "But these aren't freaks."

"Then what are they?" Her reporter instinct suddenly kicked in.

Before Buck could answer, the air was filled with the beating roar

of an approaching helicopter. It came in low and fast, almost as if it were going to attack. Greta wondered if they should run for cover. Wifredo drew his .45. Buck and the villagers looked and waved as if they were expecting the helicopter.

"Just what is going on here?" Greta was tempted to take Wifredo's .45 and use it on Buck.

SHE SUDDENLY WONDERED IF BUCK WAS STILL ALIVE. AFTER LOOKING down the barrel of the masked man's gun, she decided not to ask. Remembering the remark about some of the bodies being hard to identify, her stomach tied itself into a throbbing knot.

"IT'S COCKFIGHT DAY IN AGUADURA," BUCK LEERED, LIKE A JERK.

"Hey," Wifredo said. "Some of these people. The way they're dressed ... they're city people, or at least not locals."

Greta looked around. Her eyes got big and she gasped.

"The big black guy in the dark glasses—he's CIA!"

"There's also a Microsoft rep, a personal buyer for an American pop musician, some local 'pharmaceutical exporters,' some Russian 'importers,' some German manufacturers, a few Chinese market researchers, and the kids in the fatigues and bandanas are Glowing Road," said Buck.

"That's Shining Path." Greta was really getting irritated.

"No. This is a new group. They're corporate Marxists."

"That's absurd."

"Twenty-first century Latin America—ya gotta love it!"

"I better get the camera out and ready," Wifredo said.

"Yup," Buck said, "there's some really great *Hoy y Más Alla* material here." He switched to his cowboy Spanish, saying something to a villager in a Chicago Bulls baseball cap, who said something to a small boy in a Spice Girls T-shirt, who ran and came back carrying a small cage.

Buck gestured like a circus ringmaster. "My darling Greta, and stalwart Wifredo, let me, your humble gonzo paleontologist, proudly present a real, live rexito!"

The thing in the cage was about the size of a rooster, didn't have feathers, but was definitely not a plucked rooster. For one thing, it had teeth—tiny, needle-sharp ones that glittered in the tropical sun. Second, it was covered with scales. It also had a tail that stuck straight out behind it like an antenna.

"MAGNIFICENT, AREN'T THEY?" THE MASKED MAN SAID. THERE WAS a dreamy look in his eyes.

WIFREDO LET OUT A COLORFUL SPANISH EXPLETIVE.

"What is it?" Greta said, aiming a finger at the cage.

Buck looked horrified and grabbed Greta's hand. His grip hurt her. With incredible speed, the thing in the cage poked its head between the bars and snapped its jaws, making a noise like a sound effect in a Hong Kong martial arts film.

"Careful there, Greta my dear." Buck relaxed his grip on her hand. "This little guy could take your pretty finger off with one bite."

He didn't let go of her hand. Soon he was rubbing her palm with his thumb. His upper lip curled.

She knew what he was doing, but shock prevented her from reacting. Her brain tried to sort things out, but there was just too much. All she could do was stand there, listen to her heart go like a machine-gun, and look into the small, dark, sparkling eyes of the thing that had almost mutilated her, while Buck caressed her hand.

Eventually—just as Wifredo had the camera ready—her reporter's

instincts kicked back in.

"What is that thing?" she asked again, yanking her hand free of Buck's.

He pulled his sunglasses down so she could see the dreamy expression in his cobalt-blue eyes. "Why, this is the biggest news in two hundred million years! The dinosaurs did not die! Their descendants are alive and well, and living right here in the Upper Amazon!"

Wifredo used another colorful Spanish expletive.

Meanwhile, the city people were gathering around, trying to get a good look at the thing in the cage. Among them, Greta recognized a Brazilian telenovella producer, a Swiss bank representative, an Argentine entrepreneur, an "unofficial" military officer from Chile, and a field agent for a Japanese corporation.

"Where did you get it?" Greta was getting into interview mode.

Buck pushed his sunglasses back up, bowed his head, and kicked the dirt in an approximation of humility. "Ah, to be honest, I've got to admit that I am not the discoverer of the rexitos." He pointed to the villager in the Chicago Bulls cap. "That credit goes to my man Jacinto here." The little villager gave a genuine display of humility. "One day, while hunting, he came across these here last of the dinosaurs, which I'm calling 'rexitos'—until some stuffy academic gets around to coming up with an official, Latin name."

"Why rexitos?"

"Take a good look at this guy here. Kinda looks like a scaled-down version of the ever-popular tyrannosaurus rex, don't it? Look at that big head! And those teeth! Check out those itty-bitty, two-fingered hands! All tyrannosaurid signs of the carnosaurian!"

"But weren't such creatures ... big?"

"Why yes, my dear Greta, they were. Were supposed to be. But as usual, I've come up with the unusual. Somewhere around two million years ago, the ancestors of these little dudes were probably very much like the big mothers that Hollywood likes to make movies about. These little fellas may have even been related to the gigantosaurus that was found down Argentina way, but more likely they belong to a smaller, local species that we have yet to find any fossils of."

"But how did they get so small?"

"Evolution, gorgeous. And survival. They lived on a high plain that was cut off from the rest of the environment. There wasn't much to eat up there, so each generation got smaller, adapted to the new situation."

"I don't understand. How is this possible?"

"There's a precedent for it. On an island off Siberia, they once found the remains of mammoths that were only about five thousand or so years old—way later than mammoths became extinct everywhere else! The same reduction thing happened with them—they were midget mammoths!"

A man in a Colombian military uniform pushed his way through the crowd. "Please, tell me! Were these creatures found in Colombia?"

Buck smiled. "Well, it's actually kinda hard to tell. Floods, earthquakes, and volcanic activity keep changing the landscape. That's how they got out and started running amok through the mountains. So who knows what country this originally belonged to?"

The military man was displeased by that answer.

"Well anyway," Buck went on, not bothering to wait for another question. "Jacinto and the rest of his folks in Aguadura soon found out that not only are rexitos good eating—"

This caused a representative from an American fast food company to smile.

"—they taste a little more like beef than chicken—but they can also really kick butt in a cockfight. Which we are all set up in the village's arena over there to show you!"

Buck pointed to a large, thatched-roof structure. Jacinto and the boy led the visitors to it.

"You're really gonna get some spectacular footage here," Buck told Greta and Wifredo.

Greta groaned. She hated cockfighting, bullfighting, and all the other barbarous traditions that Hispanic cultures had dragged into the twenty-first century. Buck, on the other hand, loved all that blood-spattered spectacle, and was determined to force Anglo culture into

She fully expected

tolerating—and eventually wallowing in—them. This upset her. He knew it, and was enjoying it.

"I always said that a cockfight is the closest we have to seeing what it was like when dinosaurs went at each other," he said, "that is, until the discovery of the rexitos! Hey, bet in a couple of years there's coverage of rexito fights on all the global sports nets!"

"WE MANAGED TO RECOVER THAT FOOTAGE," SAID THE MASKED MAN. "Fascinating. There are possibilities there."

THE REXITO DEMOLISHED THE ROOSTER—WHICH HAD THE advantage of wearing razor-sharp, metal spurs. The crowd—locals and visitors overloading the flimsy arena—went wild. Greta felt a little sick.

The visitors were soon clamoring over to Buck, their questions becoming an incomprehensible cacophony.

Buck cleared his throat and raised his arms. "If you'll just follow me, you'll get a chance to examine more of our rexitos—for the right price, you may even purchase some!"

They nearly trampled Buck as they stampeded to the open area just behind the arena. There were rows of caged rexitos. There was plenty of space between the cages—so much that it looked odd.

Some of the visitors rushed to the cages and tried to pick them up, and nearly lost fingers to small but swift, snapping jaws.

There were cries of "How much?" in several languages. The offer of a hundred thousand this and a million that. It was a feeding frenzy.

The rexitos' heads bobbed back and forth, fixated on the bidders, excited by all the motion and sound. There was hunger in their little eyes.

Greta pushed her way toward Buck. She was disgusted, but a reporter to the end.

"Why are all the cages so far apart?" she asked.

"Well," Buck said, "these little guys have some interesting habits. One at a time they're about as manageable as your Joe Typical Onery Rooster on a bad day; but when you get a lot of them together, this flocking instinct takes over and wow! They kinda act like piranha with legs! So we have to be careful."

There was a scream.

A white man in a Banana Republic safari suit was pulling a bloody stump of a finger away from a cage where a rexito was licking its lips.

Others were picking up the cages by the handles on their tops. This also excited the rexitos. Tiny jaws snapped, like firecrackers in the distance.

There was a louder burst of explosions. A Latin American man in fatigues held up a smoking AK-47. "I'm taking these creatures in the name of ..." his chest exploded with a bullet's impact before he could finish his sentence.

Suddenly, the crowd was bristling with firearms of various makes and models. There was a moment of silent tension, soon shattered by bursts of gunfire—some of it fully automatic. More blood flew through the hot, moist air. Voices cried out unintelligibly, while bodies thrashed, collided, and fell lifelessly to the ground.

It was hard to tell how or when the first cage broke open. There were a lot of bullets flying around; or a misplaced foot or a collapsing corpse may have provided sufficient impact. Maybe all the motion and the smell of blood got the rexitos excited enough to snap the rods and wires with their killer jaws. No one was really paying much attention to anything very far beyond personal survival at the time.

And the rexitos moved so fast. One moment Greta was trying to take cover from the gunfire; and the next, tiny dinosaurs were all over, acting (as Buck has so vulgarly put it) like piranha with feet.

Things went into a kind of slow motion. Greta knew there had to have been a lot of noise, but her memory was silent—like an

to feel needle-like teeth breaking her skin, shredding her flesh.

arty death scene in a movie. Then it all fused into a hot, wet, sticky, dazzling fade-out...

THE MASKED MAN LOOKED DISAPPOINTED. HIS GUN DROOPED.

"Is that all? We were hoping you had more specific information—as in the location where the rexitos were discovered."

"Sorry." She thought mournfully of Wifredo. And Buck. And all the villagers, and the others who were there for the massacre.

He casually raised the gun in her direction again.

"Buck McCalla. You know him."

"Yes." She thought she had already made that clear. "We've run into each other. The sort of stories my producer likes seem to overlap with his interests."

The masked man smiled. "What do you know about him?"

"More than I really care to. He's one of those crazy, out-of-control North Americans who's always running around causing trouble. I go off on some silly assignment, and there he is, bouncing off the walls, babbling like an idiot..."

That didn't satisfy the masked man. "Who does he work for?"

"He's a freelancer. A con man. Always talking unsuspecting people into his schemes."

The masked man's mouth puckered up. His hand tightened on the gun. For a few seconds she was blinded by the glare of the laser sight.

"Are you sure all that buffoonery isn't just a cover up?" he asked, making the red dot dance around her face. "That he doesn't really work for some government agency? Or a multinational corporation?"

Greta wanted to laugh; but one look into the masked man's eyes made her change her mind. Instead, she tried to sound serious. "You don't understand. Buck and organizations don't get along. He's too wild..."

The red dot shook violently, dangerously crossing her eyes, until it finally settled back in the middle of her forehead.

"Why are you protecting him?" he demanded. "Are you part of his team?"

Taking a deep breath, Greta said, as calmly as she could manage, "I couldn't possibly work with him!"

The masked man showed his teeth. "You are not cooperating!" His trigger finger tensed.

Greta closed her eyes and said a quick prayer. To die like a scene from a bad movie. What a royal bitch.

SHE WAITED FOR THE GUNSHOT, PAIN, DEATH. THERE WAS ONLY a stretch of silence that seemed to go on forever. Warm tears mingled with cold sweat on her cheeks.

Suddenly, there was an explosion.

A shock wave knocked her off the cot. It was as if gravity was suddenly cut off. She seemed to be floating in slow motion, like in a cheap movie where they want to draw the violence out so the audience can savor it for several moments longer than they could if they were witnessing an actual incident.

There was something wrong. She never imagined that being shot would feel like this. There was no pain of a bullet entering and tearing through her body ... or her brain? Why? Could she be in shock? Numb because her demolished nervous system had shut down?

Her eyes opened just before she hit the floor. She could see, and there didn't seem to be any blood on or around her.

Her ears were ringing from the explosion.

The masked man—still in slow motion—was scrambling back to his feet. The explosion had knocked him down, too. He rushed to the door, leading with his 9mm.

He fired a shot. Greta could barely hear it with her ringing ears.

He suddenly dropped the gun. A long, thin dart was sticking out of his neck. Like a rag doll, he collapsed—returning to normal speed by the time he hit the floor.

For a while nothing but smoke came through the door.

Then a rexito hopped into the doorway. There was something funny about its head. It seemed to be wearing a shiny hat. No, it had some kind of state-of-the-art high-tech hardware mounted on its skull.

Carefully, it leaned across the threshold and moved its head in an unnaturally smooth sweep, to give a panoramic view of the room. There was something on the lump of technology that looked like a tiny camera lens. It twinkled at Greta, like a third eye.

There was a noise, a strange hybrid between reptilian chirping and electronic squeaking.

Suddenly, the doorway was full of rexitos. They all wore the shiny high-tech hats. They spotted her and moved into the room.

Greta snapped out of her slow-mo shock stupor. She leaped up, backward, scrambling with her arms and legs, moving more like a spider than human being. She got up on the bed and, squealing, tried to climb up the wall. But her all-too-human hands couldn't get a grip on the naked drywall.

Sniffing the air, the rexitos flowed into the room. Scores of tiny eyes and lenses were focused on her.

She squealed louder, not quite screaming. The rexitos all stared up at her, as if she were about to give a speech.

Greta bit her lip, closed her eyes, and said a quick prayer.

She fully expected to feel needle-like teeth breaking her skin, shredding her flesh. But it didn't happen.

Shuddering, she forced her eyes open.

Odd humanoid figures had appeared in the doorway. They were small, and their heads were big and misshapen—like the sort of creatures that were supposed to come from inside UFOs. Greta sighed. Had the world gone stark, raving sci-fi, or had she simply gone stark, raving mad?

The figures moved closer, through the dissipating smoke and across the doorway. Straining to focus her tortured eyes, Greta tried to see them more clearly. All of them were armed with blow guns. And they were human. And female. Small—far less than two meters, including the big heads, which only looked that way because of their big hair, thick braids tied in fantastic knots—women with reddish-brown skin. They wore only baggy work-out trunks and high-topped sneakers, in dazzling, day-glo colors. The only thing that covered the rest of their bodies, including their breasts, were stripes of a paint that glittered, as if it contained gold dust, and lots of it.

That couldn't be right, thought Greta. This couldn't be real. It must all be a hallucination. Or her introduction to some ridiculous Hell, Heaven, or Purgatory.

Then a very American voice boomed into the room:

"Twenty-first century Latin America—ya gotta love it!"

A familiar, sloppy figure appeared in the doorway. It towered over the women.

"Buck?" Greta inquired.

"Greta!" he cried, opening his arms as if to embrace the whole room. "I'm so glad you made it."

She released her death grip on the drywall and let herself slide back down on the bed. "These women," she said. "Who are they?"

He grinned. "Great, ain't they? Let me introduce Queen Chixipxi and the Chauxumoyos."

"I feel like I've stumbled into a bad porno film!" Greta said as some of the little women helped her to her feet.

"Ain't it great how life imitates art?" Buck strolled into the room; there was a device like a small cell phone in one of his hands. "Notice how they all kinda look like clones? And there are no males in their tribe. My theory is that they reproduce by herbally induced partheno-

genesis! Feminists are gonna love 'em! Like I always say, lost worlds and new frontiers are all around us—ya just gotta open your eyes!"

He hit a button on the device with his thumb. Without looking, the rexitos with the metal hats got out of his way.

"You can control them," Greta felt dizzy, but the Chaumumoyos made sure she didn't fall.

"Yeah." He held up the device. "With a little help from some friends that I made a deal with."

"And who would they be?" Greta looked at the masked man. "And who was he?"

"Nobody that most folks would know at this point in time," Buck said. "Some new players in this new game in a new world. It'll take some time to even begin to explain."

Greta's eyes suddenly opened wide. "Wifredo! What happened to him?"

Taking off his hat, Buck look as concerned as he could. "I'm afraid that he died. The rexitos got him."

"You bastard! You can control them!" She lunged at him. The Chaumumoyos held her back.

"Whoa, babe!" Buck held up his hands, almost dropping his hat and the control device in the process. "That deal hadn't been made then. This control system hadn't been set up yet. It couldn't be helped. I got some nasty bites in that ruckus ... like I said, it's gonna take a lot of explaining." He put his hat back on his head. "And I'm gonna need your help with that, because, like it or not, the world's gotta know."

Shaking her head, Greta said, "I don't think the world is ready for all this."

"Hell," Buck said, with a big smile, "the world is *never* ready!"

ALL THROUGH THE FLIGHT HERNAN'S GUTS BURNED, THROBBED, and made strange noises. He tried to suppress the moan, as he had for the entire flight. "You've got to be careful," Miguelito had said, many times, "and not attract any attention to yourself!" Somehow, Hernan managed not to scream.

He looked out the window. They were over Florida. So here he was in North America, again. But this part of it looked a lot like South America. The same tropical cities melting into jungle.

"Are you all right, sir?" asked the flight attendant—the young, pretty blonde one with the blue eyes, faint freckles, and the hot little body.

He looked into those blue eyes, which were filled with a mixture of concern and alarm. How he wished he could be looking into those eyes under different circumstances. It would be nice to say that he desperately needed her help, and more.

"No thank you, miss," he said, trying hard to speak English without a trace of a Spanish accent. "I'll be all right. We are almost there, aren't we?"

"Yes we are." Her expression grew more distressed. "But you ... don't look so well. Be sure to let us know if you need any help."

Burning needles went to work just behind his navel. He grunted as quietly as he could.

"That won't be necessary." His face felt funny, suddenly hot and cold at the same time. "I'll be all right. Honest."

He tried to smile.

She looked as if she was about to argue. But then, "Very well," she said, and went away to talk to the other flight attendant.

Looking at the window, he saw his reflection. Huge beads of sweat had broken out all over his face. They were growing bigger, merging, flowing down to his chin.

He wiped his face with his sleeve, then rubbed it with his shaking hands. It was already wet again.

Gritting his teeth, he closed his eyes and heard the pilot announcing that they were making their final approach to the international airport in Orlando. He opened his eyes again to see the PLEASE FASTEN YOUR SEATBELT sign. His stomach was swollen and sore. He fastened the belt, but left it loose.

There were more needles inside him. And more sweat, all over, soaking his clothes.

You can make it, Hernan, he thought. The plane is landing. He closed his eyes again. If he could just fill his mind with other things:

thoughts of \$50,000 in small, unmarked bills, of Disney World, of American girls with blue eyes and freckles all over their bodies... tough it out for a bit, just long enough to get off the plane, get through customs, meet Miguelito's business associates, then he would be all right. The horrible pain would go away after a few bottles of Pepto-Bismol and a comfortable night in a motel.

But for now, as the plane touched down and braked on the runway, the needles just grew hotter and more numerous.

He ground his teeth together, suddenly tasted blood. Must have bitten himself.

As soon as the plane stopped moving, he tore open his seat belt. As the pilot made the announcement for everyone to remain seated until the PLEASE FASTEN YOUR SEATBELT sign was turned off, he was already in the aisle, scrambling toward the exit. It was barely open when he got to it.

"Sir," the young, blonde flight attendant said as she grabbed him, "you're bleeding."

"I know, I know," he said, not even letting her grip slow him down. He dragged her along a couple of steps before she let go.

The pain overloaded his nervous system. The covered gangway seemed an impassable labyrinth. He hit a shaky wall, fell onto the mobile floor, crawled as his insides writhed with waves of agony.

When he reached the gate he was greeted by a sea of horrified faces. What were they all looking at? Hadn't they ever seen a man just trying to do his job? But maybe the fact that he was crawling instead of walking was what was disturbing them. He tried to stand. Couldn't. Coughed up a spray of blood.

Then his gut exploded. The fronts of his shirt and pants were suddenly soaked in blood. The pain was so great, he was almost blinded with it—but he had to see. What he had been carrying inside his moist, tender flesh was about to emerge.

His bloodied shirt, pants—and even his belt—began to tear away. At first this was from the inside, something was sucking the fabric in. Then it burst out as tiny reptilian bodies leaped out in a splattering of gore.

The gawking crowd screamed. The bloody little things screamed back at them and bared needle-like teeth.

"It's just like *Alien*!" someone said in English that Hernan barely comprehended now. Another tiny monster popped out of his shredded gut. And another. And another.

Soon the crowd was face to face with 12 newborn monsters.

Hernan's vision blurred.

People were babbling in English, Spanish, and a few other languages, saying things like "How horrible," and "Somebody do something." Hernan could also make out, "Cool," and "Get out the camcorder." The newborn creatures huddled around Hernan, as if they thought he was their mother. Their tiny heads darted back and forth, looking for escape.

Then, with amazing speed, the 12 tiny creatures made a mad dash for freedom. People shrieked and scrambled out of their way. Soon the muzak couldn't be heard at all. Hernan tried to see where his little ones had gone, but they had disappeared in a flash.

How long would it take them to get to Disney World? Hernan was wondering, as he let his head fall back on the floor. He closed his eyes, and coughed up some more blood. When he reopened his eyes, they focused on the screen of a coin-operated TV set that was playing to an empty chair.

It was tuned to the local Mundovision station. Greta Franco, who has looking a little worse for wear, was interviewing some wild-haired gringo who was chattering away in Spanish with an accent that was so bad, Hernan couldn't understand him.

They kept using that funny word: *rexitos*.

Hernan wondered what rexitos were, and how they could possibly be so important as to be mentioned on television so often.

He coughed up more blood. He didn't mind. His blood was all over the place by now.

It was getting quiet again. He could hear the muzak. It was a slowed-down version of *I Like to Be in America*, from that Broadway musical about Puerto Ricans.

North America, he thought, it's so damn weird. Ya gotta love it. □

Quill was jinxed, or so the other spacers thought. They didn't realize that made him the perfect candidate to solve the cosmic puzzle that had baffled them all.

CHASING SACRIFICE

Finding is not only a matter of where you look, but of when you look.

Rahalen Proverb

Q

uill floated in the datastream of the ship's argus. Sensor tendrils extended out far in the vanguard of the TALLEYRAND's path, feeds that gave Quill a complete image of space—the entire electromagnetic spectrum, the full range of particle telemetry, the weave of relativistic distortion from stars, planets, stray rocks, and pebbles. Even the dust, which without the envelope surrounding the ship that let them slip through space at trans-light velocities, could demolish the TALLEYRAND with a glancing blow, could be tracked if Quill wished.

But objects that small oozed around the fields enfolding the ship. Quill saw them as impressions, like the trace of a pin against clear plastic, sliding past them. Larger things still had to be avoided—skirted or moved aside by one of the ship's ductile fields—but space at that scale really was mostly empty.

BY MARK W. TIEDEMANN

Ahead lay home, Markab. The shipmaster had passed on the word that the commission was a success, the clients were happy with the ship, the crew, the project. *Talleyrand* had spent the past two months in and around a binary system that contained large fragments of an old, nonhuman Dyson sphere humans called the Lyra Construct. Evidence of many others, possibly built by the same race, existed around other stars, but this one was the most intact. The university team—which included a Rahalen Quill had yet to see and a couple of Menkans—had run a mapping and analysis investigation, using shipboard tools coupled with their own specialized probes and remotes. The big supplementals riding behind the usual environs array were stuffed now with artifacts and data, sandwiched with the recovered equipment. They had left a few pieces behind, monitors to watch the slow ballet of shattered structure as it danced between the two suns, eventually to fall into one of them. Quill had listened with interest to the speculations of the xenoarchaeologists. The Lyra Construct existed just outside the volume of space nominally controlled by the Menkans, which was one reason humans had managed to put together this survey. Even so, rumor had it that this had been the last such expedition to be mounted by the university. Still, in the glow of success, assurances came easily, like the warm smiles and temporary camaraderie.

A ship like this, however, could not afford to rest idle in station. The shipmaster had a waiting list of clients. Twenty days from now they might be running cargo or a diplomatic mission to one of the seti reaches or a cartography run for the council or courier service—

Quill thought himself lucky to be with *Talleyrand*. A big ship with a big reputation. He had worked his way up to co-engineer on board in the past six hundred days. He was pleased with himself and grateful for the chance. Especially when he could enter the flow like this and become part of the datasphere, to see with expanded eyes...

The alarm shrieked through the system. Time in the flow passed in increments of seconds. Quill damped the warning signal and requested data on the trigger. The feed narrowed to focus on a point directly in *Talleyrand's* path.

Quill stared at it, baffled. Nothing had been there a moment before. At their velocity anything larger than a human would have prompted either a firm nudge from the fields or a slight course correction. The alarm meant the object was inside the range for safe maneuver and could not be pushed out of the way, but the only circumstance that described was a large mass on a collision vector. But—Quill checked a second and third time—this thing had no momentum.

In another second, *Talleyrand's* system would automatically start dumping velocity and dropping out of translight, while simultaneously trying to change delta vee. The object was too big and too close for them to go around, even at diminished velocity. He tapped the recording and started a replay to find out where it had come from.

By now, he knew, someone else was trying to get to an interface link to join him in the ship's flow, but it would take several seconds. The argus informed him that they had less than four seconds to impact. The TEG vanes threw out invisible wings into normal space, braking fields against which the thin traces of stray atoms impacted. Quill saw them briefly, flowering glares of matter shattering, lending what energy it possessed to the ship's attempt to slow down. Ductile fields concentrated forward, pushing against the object, while the translight envelope generator began shrinking the cocoon it wrapped *Talleyrand* in, gradually introducing real space effects. The ship tried—but it knew, it showed Quill in clear notation, that the two masses would impact. The explosion would be nova-bright, creating a small nebula that might persist for decades or even centuries.

The recording opened. Quill went back to the seconds prior to the alarm and narrowed his attention to that segment of space.

Nothing. He went up and down through the various spectra. Empty space.

Then a large burst of neutrinos erupted in vacuum. Then it appeared.

It seemed to have just grown out of nothing, a point that sort of rolled into being, becoming a crystalline form, diamond-like, long—Twenty-nine kilometers long.

Two seconds. Quill could see it easily, without magnification, a bright point in the center of the ship's path. He opened the comm and sent a TEGlink signal, all wavelengths, and patched in the interpreter. He did not recognize the ship's configuration—it had to be a ship, the symmetry, the manner of its appearance, he just did not know what kind—and hoped the seti-designed interpreter could handle the language differences.

The comm showed a response. He watched the *Talleyrand* begin loading its situation updates into the TEGlink. Signals came back, repulsed. The interpreter wrestled with the alien codes. Slow, too slow. He pushed it aside and entered the signal himself. Living mind to living mind, he could scream for their help, ask them to get out of the way—

—and felt himself stretched the entire length of the distance between them. Before he could orient himself, he dived through a segmented port set in a flat tetrahedral area. Sharp-edged pieces cascaded down the well around him, shifting in and out, changing places. At the end he came against a segmented hemisphere. Each facet pulsed with color. He watched the exchange, facet to facet, and sensed a pattern. The interpreter kept throwing up frames, searching for a match. When the frames took on similar shapes to the parts comprising the hemisphere, Quill knew it was possible to communicate given enough time; the seti-made machine was finding the common ground. But it seemed so slow.

He reached out and pressed against a facet at random. It gave way and he fell through. Around him now crowded a forest of crystal-shaped tablets, fluttering as if in a breeze.

core/yylvml111/sys*1—**

*Quill dumped the *Talleyrand's* status out into the matrix—he was certain he was inside a datasphere of some kind—shifting from area to area, hoping for a connection—*

—system compromised/cOn111/*ul/error—

—felt scoured and flensed as the nonhuman system took hold of him, like a giant seizing his head in its hands and bending his face up to be screamed at, the rage sinking into him with fear and desperation and negation, finally to give up and spit him out, back into his own datasphere. Quill tore at the link, scrambling to get out of the comm signal. He looked down the TEGlink umbilical and saw the far end pucker in on itself and twist away into a black nimbus—

*—and he stared at the object, now filling his field of vision. *Talleyrand* rushed toward it, barely below lightspeed, its trajectory altered a few degrees. Quill plotted the point of impact, recognized the death of them all, including the seti on the nonhuman ship, and...welcomed it.*

At the nanosecond of impact he experienced a limitless satisfaction, as though he had fulfilled the most important duty of his life, the recognition and completion of a predestined sacrifice. He had done the best he could and achieved a perfection he had never known he wanted. The rightness of the end, the sense of almost divine rightness...

...passed into panic when *Talleyrand* sailed on, unimpeded, to empty space. Quill cast about for the object. He tapped the recorder again and watched. The enormous object seemed to recede from them just as they reached it, fell backward out of space and disappeared. The elapsed time was in moments, insignificant even in the course of a thought.

I failed...

No, not yet. He had options. Duty could still be fulfilled. No one else was in the flow with him, they were all still scrambling for stations. He had time. The elegance of instant destruction was out of reach now, but there were other, equally effective methods of killing the ship. Quill drew a mental breath, convinced of the correctness of his path, and proceeded to shut *Talleyrand* down—life support first.

As he began to work he barely noticed the sudden sea of glowing gas through which the ship now flew, created out of the brief interaction of the ship's fields with the mass of stray near-particles left behind by the vanished object, a sea that had not been there an instant before.

Quill tried to kill himself four

times, twice while still on board *Talleyrand*. Once in the infirmary by overriding his monitor and instructing it to induce coma; the second time, crudely, with a scalpel into the femoral artery. They kept him sedated then until they docked at Markab Transit. The shipmaster paid for his stay in a good clinic—he felt he owed it to Quill, who had, after all, managed to save the ship from a fatal collision. The meds fed him chemicals until his organic profile matched a control chart, then let him go. One week after his release he stepped out of a transport two hundred meters above ground. He crashed through a stand of trees that broke enough of his fall to save his life.

He could not afford the better clinics this time and ended up in an automated healing ward funded by Markab Civic Compensation. He was stuffed into a medunit and plugged into the monitors and the only time he saw another living being was during the eight-day service rounds. When he came out of the induced coma he screamed and cursed at the technicians or cried. He remembered some of them trying to talk to him a couple of times, but not after the third bout of madman ranting. Then they left him partly sedated while they ran his diagnostics.

Several major bones needed mending, plus his spleen and one kidney had ruptured in the fall. The medunit went on to repair anything it found that might be a problem. It corrected Quill's slight astigmatism and scoured out his cardiovascular system. He had been born with a slight deformity in his bile duct and the machine fixed that, as well as optimizing the gas-exchange capacity of his lungs. The medunit was conscientious in the slavish fashion of the hardwired dutybound. It worked to only one standard and would pursue that standard until ordered to stop or until it exhausted its resources. It noted that Quill possessed a full neuronal interface—access through polyceramo caps on the fingertips, a network of mesh running alongside his entire nerve harness and centering in the brain, where nanoprocessors collated the incoming signals from the link with a cybernetic gate and translated them into usable impressions for the brain—and that there seemed to be a problem with it. A trace signal kept bouncing around the system, unabsorbed, like a message without a proper address to receive it. Lacking the database for such matters, it nevertheless went ahead to resolve the issue, since the repeated traverse of the signal through the processors triggered certain chemical imbalances in the brain itself. That made it a medical concern. It searched for help.

The medunit sent inquiries to several datasumps that specialized in interface technologies. The replies it received mostly agreed that the signal needed to be purged. The best way to do that would be to see it delivered. The medunit linked to an interpreter and attempted to deliver the message. The interpreter read the code several hundred times and finally admitted that it could not decipher the address—the whole lump of data seemed both seti, which should not

have been a problem, and incomplete, which made it insoluble. So it did the next best thing—it deleted it from Quill's network. However, because it had been impacting on the brain cells directly for all this time, it needed to do something about the biochemical impression Quill still retained. The monitor rerouted it until it exiled the fey pattern to areas where it could reside undisturbed and unremembered.

The chemical imbalance began to correct itself. Without the signal banging against the receptors every few seconds, serotonin and dopamine levels started to rationalize. The entire neuronal architecture of Quill's brain straightened out. At least, at first.

Over the next few days, the maps showed the onset of deep clinical depression. The organic balance swayed, teetered, nearly collapsed, then recovered. The backlash did not send Quill into mania, but the depression was bad enough. The machine compared Quill's new brain map to the control on file. The only discrepancy now seemed to be a slight architectural variation that mimicked the pattern of the purged signal, but it did not seem to be affecting any cognitive areas. The medunit recognized its limits. It could go in and snip out the dendritic pathways, but there was no way to predict what other damage might result. There was some precedence for this effect and the data all noted that over time it would fade, like a learned skill left unused. As for the depression, it appeared to be a psychological problem now. It could prescribe medication, but its profiles showed that anything it recommended would bar the patient from his profession. If released from care now, maybe—*maybe*—Quill could come to terms with the problem on his own, *might* manage to do so before he attempted suicide again, would *possibly* recover full function with simple therapy sessions, although the regularity such sessions required would be impossible given Quill's job. The medunit's criteria were offended by so many conditionals. It could keep him cocooned indefinitely, but that was offensive to a different set of criteria.

Once more outside its limits, it asked a sentient for help.

Co Jalish was on call. The medunit had a few reservations about asking a Rahalen to pronounce on a human, but all its criteria indicated that this was an acceptable avenue. Co Jalish went over the reports carefully and meditated for a few hours. Then it accessed the medunit.

"It needs something on which to focus its attention. It seems unlikely that its former position will be available to it, therefore it will have to find something else."

"Do you have a recommendation?" the medunit asked.

"Find it a religion."

Quill closed his prayer book and

slid it into its pouch at his side as the medtechs brought a bodybag into the dry night air. He watched them load the gurney into the transport and close the doors. *Go ask*, he told himself, but he stayed under the eaves of the kiosk across from the building. The smells of coffees, teas, cijz pies, and sausage surrounded him, almost overwhelming the baking soda and corn smell of Markab itself. Even in the middle of the city the planet's annoying fragrance permeated everything. He was relieved to finally be leaving.

He imagined how he must look—young, slightly taller than average, dressed in black and red, gazing at a tragedy with the disinterest of the transient—and thought that he should move on. He was only killing time til he had to check in.

Quill hesitated just long enough and one of the techs spotted him. She waved and came across the street. He leaned against the pillar, one hand on his prayer book pouch, the other thumb-hooked on his belt.

"Evening, co," she said. "Talk?"

"Sure. What happened?" He raised his chin toward the transport.
"That's what we're hoping to find out. Suicide, it looks like. We received an anonymous comm on it. I wonder if you might know anything about it."

"Sorry."

"Here's her image." She held up a picture of a young woman with pearl-white hair and dark eyes. When Quill shook his head, she took the image back, looking disappointed. "You're sure you don't know her?"

"Forgive me, co. I'm a Prioritist." He pointed back down the street to the small chapter house.

She looked momentarily startled. "I see."

"I'm on my way to the port. I just signed to crew on the *Cryshuil*."

"Fine. I understand, co." She took out her handslate. "Can I have your name, co?"

"Quill."

She entered the data. "The *Cryshuil*, you say?"

"Yes."

"Thanks, co. We may be in touch."

She walked away and returned to the transport. He waited til it moved away.

Quill looked up then at the windows of the building where the young woman lived. Had lived. His throat felt slightly acid. Payback for the small lie. A lot of people assumed Prioritists did not involve themselves with anyone outside their order. Even so, he had not known her well. It had never occurred to him that she might suicide. She was only one of the many to whom he had done missionary work in the past three years, one of several in this building. He had spoken to her several times, drawn to her because he thought he understood the look she gave him, half-hopeful, completely skeptical, needful. He had spoken with her about duty and necessity and final choices and the need to fulfill the one thing life set for everyone, different for each individual, yet surprisingly easy to sum up. Sacrifice and duty. That was all life required for fulfillment. Each person must find the avenue, the goal, the target, the point that is the purpose of life. He had spoken of Prioritism, which taught that life provides room and time enough to be only one thing and that it is wasteful to try to be or do more. He remembered how the frantic reaching in her eyes softened, the lines of her body relaxed. He thought he had gotten through to her.

"There is no time," a lesson said, "to be more than one thing and be it well. Choose. Decide. Be. That is the only path to peace in this life. Once chosen, do not be distracted. Once chosen, you become what is chosen and cannot divide yourself to be other. That is the limitation of life. That is the limitation of time."

He had thought that she understood that. Maybe she had.

"To see where responsibility lies, go back to the beginning, to where it started," another lesson read.

But you can't really go back, he thought, not so it would mean anything.

He picked up his duffle and started walking toward the port. No responsibility here. He needed to leave. He needed to think, to go over the lessons again. There was an answer he could not remember, a message he had to deliver...somewhere. Not here. Maybe out there. Maybe.

Quill pulled out of the flow. The

imagery that had filled his mind with brightness and intense order faded and he immediately felt closed in. A typical enough reaction under normal circumstances, but the engineering module was cramped with tool cribs, redundant consoles, cluttered workbenches, and icons. The largest, a stylized representation of the Sol system, hung on rods from the nominal "top" of the

chamber. Crosses, Hindu swastikas, six-point stars, fish symbols, laurel wreaths, and other, less identifiable bric-a-brac crowded the bulkheads everywhere. The wet smell of ozone and sweat mingled with the sharp tang of hot plastic and composite. The air hummed with energy and the moaning of an ineffectual ventilator. The couch Quill occupied vibrated. He took his hands from the interface panel in front of him and tapped the screen above it, his polyceramo caps lightly ticking on its surface.

"What I thought," he said. "Routing glitch. Transient error. Happens a lot when systems are piggybacked like this."

Dobbs, *Cryshuil*'s engineer, grunted and leaned close to the screen. Perspiration slicked his skull and shimmered on the black stubble of week-old beard. The faint line of an old scar traced a jagged path above his right ear. "Gravs should work right now?" He scowled unhappily.

"Should. I can't guarantee this won't crop up again, though. These systems really ought to be separate, isolated."

"Tell it to Leshian." Dobbs rubbed his face. He was a thin man, but his hands were large, powerful-looking. He had no interface caps on his perpetually grimy fingertips, no way to do what Quill had just done.

Quill unbuckled and slipped free of the couch. He kicked toward the hatch.

"Where are you going?" Dobbs barked.

"To tell Shipmaster Leshian."

Before Dobbs could say anything else Quill caught the edge of the open hatch at the far end of the module and pulled himself out. He snagged the railing that edged the catwalk that ran the length of the hexagonal central shaft. Each angle was marked by another walkway. Four transfer rings broke the interior into five sections. In zero gee the rings did nothing. It was easier to get from point to point the way Quill now did, by launching from the rail toward a destination. The bridge was at the far end.

Almost at once, Quill felt relief to be away from Dobbs. Two days and the man irritated him, with his reticence and his constantly recurring headache. Dobbs was difficult to look at: eyes too intense, mouth hanging open slightly, and his inconsistent genuflecting to the various icons. Disingenuous searching, Quill decided. Dobbs had yet to fin his duty but he did not really want to, either. He was conflicted about it; it would be easy just to choose an obvious path, make the appropriate sacrifice, and be rid of all that tension, but Quill saw no way to easily convince the man. Still hours away from transition, when the TEG came online and *Cryshuil* fell through normal space at plulight velocities, and already Quill wanted to be apart from one of the crew. He recited a lesson as he drifted, "Patience is a gift and a test, a reward and a trial," but it did not help. Dobbs was Reform Returnist and that was the source of his conflict. It surprised Quill that the man even worked on machines, but then that was the Reform path. The concession did not extend to actually linking with them, even if it might help him to do his job better—even if it might show him his path, his duty. He had not yet told Dobbs that he was a Prioritist. Maybe he would keep that to himself; he had never worked with a Returnist and he had been told the two faiths were incompatible.

Quill sailed easily through the cool air. Green lights along the bulkheads marked the presence of each supplemental attached to the long spine of the ship. *Cryshuil* carried a full assemblage on this run, all for one client, a research team. A general briefing was scheduled for after transition.

He grabbed the railing at level three, changed trajectory and lost momentum, and deftly let himself float through the main module access. He pushed along the short corridor to the bridge hatch and stopped against the frame.

The bridge seemed more cramped than it actually was. Nearly every available surface other than deck supported equipment. On-

trol formed a horseshoe around the raised Command platform, a basic design Quill had rarely seen in practice. Now, though, Shipmaster Leshian was strapped to her command couch, going over a checklist with the pilot, Magda, who was at her console, the middle one of three facing the big data array that filled nearly 30 degrees of the forward bulkhead. Several of the screens were blank. Alphanumeric glowed on several others, and a few showed real-time visuals of *Cryshuil's* exterior. On one of these the transit station was a bright, bright dot among a scattering of stars. Markab was one of those stars now, the orangish one alongside the station.

"Rouser," Leshian said. She was a roundfaced woman with olive skin and dark eyes. One modified ear swept back like a blue-veined wing against her fuzzy gold hair.

"Grav should work, Shipmaster," he said.

"You think?" She checked her console and grinned. "We hope so, rouser." She touched a spot on the board. "This is Leshian. We're switching to full grav in 60 seconds. Secure yourselves. On my mark...now."

"You could've commed us," Magda said. She glanced at him over her shoulder. She was darker than Leshian. She had hired him—had, in fact, come looking for him—and he could not shake the impression that she had done so reluctantly.

Quill nodded noncommittally. He grabbed a handhold mounted next to the hatch and pressed himself to the deck.

"Ten seconds," Leshian announced.

At the zero mark Quill's stomach seemed to flip over with a sudden falling sensation. The strangeness passed quickly and he let go of the handhold. He stood firmly on the deck in one-half standard gee.

"Very good, rouser," Leshian said. "You've got a reputation now. Don't disappoint."

"I'll do my best," Quill said.

"We expect so. I—" She frowned at her board and quickly touched a capped finger to the interface. "Dammit! One of the passengers sprained an ankle!"

"Let me guess," Magda said. "Co Persal."

"Probably. Yes."

"And he wants to see you personally."

Leshian growled, then dipped back into the flow. When she emerged she shook her head. "After transition. I swear, if the Q weren't so good I'd never do this again. Rouser, after the general orientation I want you to get with our clients. You'll be in charge of shuttle assignments when we arrive at destination. Have you met any of them yet or has Dobbs had you in his hovel all this time?"

"No, Shipmaster. Co Dobbs has kept me busy."

"We imagine. If the silly ass would just get his implants...well, he won't. We could use two more rousers, but you're all we've got for this run. We didn't have time to replace the ones we had, so you're the entire department for the duration. Our clients have a motilist, woman named Parter, she's supposed to be good. Our motilist, Chaphma, won't talk to her for some reason, so you'll be liaison between them. Chaphma's also our med. Our regular one is in station hospital. Chaphma's qualified." She frowned. "I just hope Co Parter doesn't get hurt, I don't know if Chaphma will treat her."

"Co Persal is rated on shuttles," Magda said.

Just then someone shouldered past Quill. Tall, soft-featured, Risher took his place at the console to Magda's right.

"More than a minute's warning would be appreciated next time," he said. He pressed his hands to his interface panel and his face went slack. Several of the blank screens on the data array flickered to life, symbols scrolling up quickly.

Leshian eyed him impatiently, then shook her head. "We're also short a co-pilot this run, rouser. Take the station if you please." When Quill hesitated, she added, "You won't have to actually *do* anything, rouser.

Regs require the station be occupied while leaving or entering port."

He dropped into the couch to Magda's left and drew the restraint across his lap. He gave Magda a sheepish look, but she carefully did not look at him. Beyond her, Risher leaned back, deep in the flow, a thin line of drool trailing down his chin.

"Markab Transit Station," Leshian said aloud. She spoke for the benefit of the passengers and crew, since she could easily do this immersed in the flow. "This is Shipmaster Leshian of *Cryshuil*, requesting clearance for final approach to transition."

That surprised him. Leshian followed looser protocols than the others he had worked for. On the screens Quill saw that they were just far enough from Markab to make transition, but a couple of million km farther out would be preferable.

"Markab Transit gives clearance," she announced. "Transition in one hundred seconds at my mark...now."

Quill watched the time chop count down. He gripped the arms of the couch. The numbers on the several screens changed, the view outside shifted as if the entire ship had been yanked to one side, and

Cryshuil, suddenly severed from the universe by the envelope she now generated, fell headlong into transligh.

Quill opened the dividers between the four roustabout berths. He had never enjoyed this much private space on board a ship, not even as co-engineer on the *Talleyrand*.

Remembering his stint with that ship made him melancholy. He could remember what he had tried to do but not why, and since release from the medunit he had found that no decent ship would take him on. He slipped his hand inside his pouch to touch his prayer book. If not for the Prioritists, he might have finally succeeded in suicide. Being turned down, time after time, ship after ship—that was enough to force anyone to self-destruction. Word of what had happened on *Talleyrand* went round the Net. He knew it would never happen again, but once people knew...

The time spent with the Prioritists had been helpful. They had been waiting when the medunit released him, a committee of five people who took him in, calmed him down, gave him work to do. He had felt constantly that he had something to tell them but he could never figure out what it was. The urge to deliver a message had proved useful when they taught him mission work. Now it centered his course, gave him his hold on duty. Prioritism made sense of his nameless obsession.

Cryshuil hummed and vibrated around him, a barely perceptible tremor Quill thought of as the ship's pulse. He sat on the deck, eyes closed, and let it draw him. He loved it, being here. As good as life with the Prioritist mission had been, it had never been right for him. When Magda had accepted him he had had to walk away, excusing himself to take care of loose ends, so she would not see his reaction. That the ship was desperate, short-handed, with a commission to fulfill and no time to check his background thoroughly made no difference to Quill. He had a ship, a berth. It did not matter that rouser was several positions lower than co-engineer. Nothing mattered but that he had found a berth. This was his One Thing, his sacrifice.

He considered reading more lessons. Instead, he tucked the pouch into his duffle and stored it in the locker next to the hygienic cube. He stretched out on the bunk and stared at the ceiling, listening to the ship.

Katin flopped into the chair opposite Quill and she scanned the mess hall with a quick, darting expression.

"What I don't like," she said, barely loud enough for Quill and Magda to hear, "is the low resource status."

Magda smiled tolerantly at the quartermaster.

Katin turned suddenly to face Quill, scowling at him. "This dwarf we're going to, it's four hundred light years out of Markab, but we don't take a full crew and only a single tier of backup components. That's too tight."

"Three hundred and seventy," Magda said. Katin frowned at her and Magda added, "Light years. It's just a survey, nothing we haven't done before, short crew and otherwise."

"Not this tight, not this deep." Katin gave Quill another unpleasant squint, then turned away and slouched in her chair.

Magda shrugged. Quill looked toward the front of the hall where the survey team, *Cryshuil's* clients, huddled over slates and made adjustments on a projector. Co Persal, the team leader, talked constantly, limping slightly with his twisted ankle from place to place around his people. Quill had spoken to none of them yet but he knew each one by sight. Shell, a compact woman with black hair intricately braided, was the team data pusher. She sat in front of the projector, occasionally feeding in an instruction, her eyes drifting lazily over the room at the gathered crew. Co Parter, the motilist, was absent. Leshian sat alone, leaning back against the bulkhead. Dobbs shared a table with Risher and Chaphma. Chaphma was a stout man with brilliant tattooed swaths over his face, which drew occasional disapproving looks from Dobbs. Dobbs kept shifting his attention from Chaphma to the two seti members of the survey team.

Quill found it difficult not to stare at them. Of all the seti races, the Rahalen seemed the most humanlike, but the impression faded quickly. With human bone structure, they would appear gaunt. Instead their skulls were smooth almost to the point of artifice, lacking cheekbones, a chin, a jawline, making them seem like idealized versions of themselves. Long eyes that seemed constantly slitted, yet with striking azure irises that changed density with variations in light. Mouths that at first glance looked small and thin-lipped were actually flaps that shifted with speech, but never opened. A bony ridge gave the impression of a nose, but they breathed through spongy patches along the sides of their throats. Two arms, two legs, the suggestion of genitals, deep chest cavities—humanlike, but not human.

By contrast, the Menkans were comfortably alien. Collections of dark filaments with pale tips around three supporting trunks that moved on bunches of webbed pseudopodia. One trunk was taller than the other two, but that meant little: You never knew where to look when speaking to one and it was impossible to tell from where the slightly plotive replies came. Menkans had difficulty with sibilants so, out of respect or embarrassment, no one knew, they spoke seldom except to their Rahalen partners. Their association with the Rahalen made sense if what he had heard was true, that the Menkans did not possess translight capabilities and that they depended on the Rahalen to travel the stars. Quill still did not know if the filaments were sheathed or if the Menkans went around naked.

Persal nodded suddenly and straightened.

"All right, I think we're ready now," he said. He rubbed his right forearm nervously, then gestured to Shell. She switched on the projector.

The wall behind them filled with stars. Off to the right the luminous trails of a nebula stretched like a mythic medusa, already fading from memory.

"I'm Co Persal of the Merrick University, histoxenology department, expedition chair. I'd like to thank Shipmaster Leshian for the courtesy extended. I'd, uh, also like to introduce and thank Co Sapur, our Rahalen liaison. We're traveling in seti territory and Co Sapur is our representative to the other races. Co Mysqual is a Menkan researcher who will be observing. Our appreciation, coes."

The Rahalen bowed slightly. "Co Persal and I have worked together before. It is always a privilege."

Persal smiled self-consciously, then turned to the display.

"This," Persal said, tapping the area of the nebula with his knuckles, "is what remains of a nova first recorded four-and-a-half centuries ago in the constellation Delphinus. That should give you some idea of the area we're interested in. It's within the range of Menkan space, of course. We are *not*, however, interested in the nova or the nebula. What we *are* interested in is this." He tapped a spot in the center of the star field that appeared empty.

"Nothing there," he continued. "At least when we look at it in plain ordinary visible light. But if we look at it in the infrared range..."

Shell worked her machine. The entire display shifted to brighter colors, oranges, reds, some blues and violets, streaks and blotches of white. A number of objects appeared for the first time, stars too distant or dim to make a decent showing in the human-visual range. One in particular throbbed dully in the very center of the display, a muddy orange blob. Persal pointed to it.

"We're interested in that. Technically, a substellar object, what we used to call a brown dwarf, designation sso1190."

"And what," Katin said softly, "is so special about an almost sun?"

Persal jabbed a finger at her, startling her. Quill suppressed a laugh. Magda grinned.

"Good question," Persal said. "Normally, nothing. In fact, even in this case there's very little about the dwarf itself that seems interesting. Point seven standard solar masses, radiating roughly 1,300 degrees kelvin, cooling down. Two things, though, attracted our attention. The first, its proper motion is bringing it closer to our sphere. Say, another hundred thousand years or so it will cross our present claim line. The second..."

On cue, Shell worked her console. The display changed once more. Now the dwarf dominated the wall, a grim surface that roiled slowly. The detail was predictably murky, which made it all the more disturbing. It looked as if the star it might have been was trapped inside, pushing at its envelope like a living thing working at its egg.

Then something sliced off one end. The shadow bit deeper. Over the course of a minute an irregular shape eclipsed the dwarf, covering easily 40 percent of the orangish glow. Quill felt his scalp tingle, a warning of recognition.

"That is an accelerated view," Persal explained. "Its orbit is about 84 days. As you can see, it's very large. Based on its orbit and how close it would have to be to the primary, it's enormous. And that's the problem. It shouldn't be there. We believe it to be a missing piece of the Lyra Construct or possibly a fragment of another, previously unrecorded Dyson."

Dobbs stood up, his chair scraping back. "Seti," he said, then left the mess.

"Damn," Magda breathed, shaking her head. "Katin, I hate to admit it, but maybe you're right."

"—the remote backups are all tied in to here via the links you'll be installing in the shuttles." Persal paused, frowning. "How many are there anyway?"

"Shuttles?" Quill asked. "Five. Only one of them is equipped with a direct interface." He wagged his fingers.

"Well, it doesn't matter that much. Once the grid is set up, one shuttle is all we'll need on site."

Quill looked down the row of equipment cases strapped against the bulkhead. He estimated the time he would need to move all this into the shuttle bay.

"We should get started as soon as possible, Co Persal."

"Mmm." He scrolled down the manifest in his hand. "There's only one set of interpretive components for the liaison and observer..."

"The setis?"

"Yes, they have their own datasumps. You need to make sure they have a trunk line off the main feed." He looked up. "Have you ever worked with a seti before?"

"No," he lied.

"Don't worry. Sapur is very accommodating. I've known him for, oh, 14 years."

"Are they looking for something, too?" he asked.

Persal grinned. "The Menkans have apparently been searching for something for centuries. I think it's related to these Dysons that seem to be strewn throughout their sphere, but as little as we know about them that's just a guess. They won't tell us what it is, but after they found out we do archaeology they started petitioning to join every expedition. They've actually been very useful from time to time. You heard about the dig on Karvanus? Worthen's famous for it, but he'd never have known what he had if his Menkan observer hadn't been there to point it out. It's become almost common to have them along now, although they quickly lose interest in most of our work. We've offered to help them, but of course they never accept or refuse, just continue to accompany us on each new site. The rumor, though, has it that they're looking for their god."

Quill suppressed a sudden urge to go speak to the Menkan. Perhaps later. "And Sapur?"

"Sapur and I have a good friendship, based on complementary objectives. As far as I know, the Rahalen aren't looking for anything."

Everyone looks for something, Quill thought. He wondered then if Persal were really looking for anything, or if looking had become an end in itself. The idea made him oddly uncomfortable.

"Anyway," Persal said, laying down the manifest, "there's a lot to do. There." He pointed and limped toward a crate. "This looks like the seti interpreter. We'll start with this."

"To be whole and complete

you must sacrifice yourself to a single shape," Quill read from the open prayer book. "That is the shape of your self, manifest in the purpose you choose. Through sacrifice you may gain a universe."

Magda bobbed an eyebrow and Katin simply frowned, digging at the dirt beneath her fingernails with a small knife. Quill waited silently for questions. *The seeker will seek without the need to be lured*, another lesson ran, but Quill's experience had taught

him that sometimes a little nudge was necessary. Still, he waited—shipboard rules often forbade proselytizing, but no one had yet made that clear on *Cryshuil*.

Katin cleared her throat. "What if you fit more than one shape?"

"Can't be," Quill said. "There's only one true shape. Lots of false shapes, lots of forms that we almost fit, and some of them feel comfortable, but they're never right. We all have only one that's right."

"And if you can't find it?"

"You keep looking."

"And spend your life constantly dissatisfied," Magda said. "Never at ease with what you do become, always looking for perfection."

"It's not that hard if the search is honest."

Magda laughed. "Sounds more like obsession to me. Are you obsessed, rouser? I wouldn't have thought it."

"I like to think I've found my core, my shape."

"You like to think that. You aren't sure?"

"I'm—yes, I am, but being too sure can cause you to lose sight of it. The arrogance supplants the truth."

Magda shook her head but said nothing. Katin continued frowning. Twice she almost spoke. On the third attempt she said, "What if your shape, your true form, is evil?"

"That's the mirror shape, not the true one. Everything has its opposite. Sometimes they seem like the same thing."

"How would you know the difference?"

"The truth is never evil."

"That's sophist garbage, rouser," Magda said. "You could tie people in epistemological knots with that. You could even get a person killed with it."

Quill controlled the wince that shot through him, his thoughts snapped back to the girl on Markab who had suicided. "Sometimes a person's truth comes in a dark shape and though it may be evil to others, it's not for them."

Magda stood. "I doubt you really believe that."

Katin looked up at Magda. "What do you think truth is?"

"A clear conscience. Thanks, rouser. I was curious about Prioritism. I had a long talk with Dobbs when he came on board about Reform Returnism. Take my advice, don't get into a debate with him about any of this. I have to check in with Risher, then see about Chaphma's prep."

Quill watched her leave, grateful and disappointed at once. He wanted Magda to approve though he could not explain why, though he felt a wash of relief at her absence. She tested him, he realized, and a part of him welcomed the challenge. He glanced at Katin.

"And you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Your religion doesn't sound practical."

"But you're looking for something."

She grunted. "Aren't we all?"

"I—"

"Did you believe this stuff when you were on the *Talleyrand*?"

Quill felt himself stiffen. There it was, again. "No, I wasn't a Prioritist then."

"Do you think it might've helped?"

"I don't know how to answer that."

Katin sighed. "I'm trying to decide how to deal with you. I was there. I was a rouser with the expedition team, not part of the regular crew. I wondered—I asked you what happens if your true shape is evil. What if it's to do with death?"

Quill felt his face warm and knew he was blushing. He thought of the suicide, thought of his own attempts. Before he could find an answer, Katin pushed to her feet.

"Look, thanks. I got work to do. I appreciate you taking the time to read from your book."

She hurried out of his quarters. Quill leafed through his prayer book for a few minutes, hoping to find a passage that would help him explain what had just happened, how he now felt, but the pages seemed lifeless at the moment.

He snapped it closed and tucked it back in its pouch. He had not thought much about the applicability of the lessons for a long time. On Markab, doing mission work for the chapter house, they made perfect sense. They kept him focused, intact. At the end of his year as a novice he had come to a point of decision: *What am I?* He had always wanted to work in space and for all of his adult life he had worked ships. He felt no hesitation to choose that life again.

But out here, with a thin shell between the universe and himself, the lessons lost clarity. The words still meant the same things, but they no longer seemed so solid and dependable. He doubted. Inside the doubt he recognized reality, that he still wanted to end...something. His life, most probably. He had thought he could return to space and start again and find the same joy he remembered from before the incident.

Quill leaned forward on his bunk. Ever since Magda had accepted him for crew he had felt a growing elation, and when he rode the shuttle up from Markab to the transit station and boarded *Cryshuil*

it was like coming home. It was so *good* to be back on a ship and working. There was no doubt about his choice, no reservations that perhaps he did not belong here. The sense of rightness occupied him, whole and complete, as though it were something he could pick up in his hands or wear or breathe.

But along with all that he found the same nagging urge to complete a task he could not define. He willed himself to ignore it, but the result of the internal back and forth was a low-level, pervasive dissatisfaction, a little bundle of anxiety harboring a childlike fascination with cessation. It whispered to him when he was between tasks and his mind was idle for a short time. *You shouldn't be here...you should remove yourself...*

Like a tumor, he decided, an idea, a thought, a set of concepts that clung to him.

I'm too happy to die, he thought, slipping briefly into the coziness of sacrifice.

You don't belong here...

Quill squinted up into the clutter.

He moved his lamp to better see the connections amid the bunches of dull-surfaced components, and carefully reached into the opening to feel around behind a cluster of small spheres. Earlier he had cleaned out a nest of spiders from within another of the shuttle's maintenance panels. The little reddish-brown things had scrambled halfway up his arm before he managed to get a rag over them to wipe them off. No bites, but now he explored cautiously. As long as the link checks came back nominal, no one ever cracked these areas open to do a physical inspection. It amazed Quill the kind and amount of foreign junk collected in so-called sealed spaces. His fingers brushed the capped connectors he wanted. He began prying the plastic coverings off.

"Do you need assistance?"

Quill looked down, past his knees and the edge of the agrav platform on which he hovered above the deck. Co Sapur, the Rahalen, stared back at him. Quill felt a chill crawl over his scalp.

"No...I just found the last site."

The Rahalen inclined its head but continued to gaze up, unblinking.

"Um...is there something else I can do for you, co?" Quill asked.

"You are Quill? The rouster?"

"Yes."

"You were on the *Tall'rand*?"

Quill dropped one of the plastic caps. He stared back at the Rahalen, heart rate faster now. "Were you?"

"No. A companion was." Sapur waited. Then: "You are reluctant to discuss it?"

"I am."

"Would you do us the favor of visiting our module when your duties permit?"

"Why?"

"So that we may discuss it privately."

Quill turned his attention back to the access panel. "I'll have to see what my schedule allows, co."

"Of course."

When Quill glanced down again, the seti had moved off.

"Damn setis."

Dobbs stood a meter off, glaring across the bay.

"Pardon?"

"I said 'damn setis.' I told Leshian not to take this run. We got no business messing around in this seti crap."

"I thought this was Co Persal's commission."

"You thought? Well, maybe. But the *Lyra Construct* is old data. He's been trying to get funding for this commission for most of a year now

and nobody's interested. I heard he got more than half his funding from the Rahalen. The university made up the difference because the setis are interested. This is a seti run, don't you believe otherwise."

"It doesn't matter to me."

"It should. What did he ask you?"

"My concern, co."

"If you're in trouble, rouster, let me know. I can help."

Quill bit back a sharp response and nodded. "Appreciate that."

Dobbs nodded, then winced. He pressed his fingers to his eyes briefly. "I wish you hadn't fixed the gravity." He glowered up at Quill, then strode off.

Almost the entire bank of moni-

itors and readouts was engaged. Quill squirmed uncomfortably in the co-pilot's couch, barely keeping up with the flow of data. He wanted to dip into the interface and watch transition from within the system, but he had not been given permission. He glanced over at Magda, sunk deep in the flow. Beyond her, Risher looked half-dead, head lolling to one side. Quill wondered how he looked when linked.

"Rouster."

Quill touched the conun switch. "Here."

"Dobbs. There's a problem with the number three vane. It's running out of resonance by about half a point."

"Yes...?"

"I can't locate the source of the flutter. Could be anything, even a kink in the field lines. Go in and see."

"We're right in the middle of transition—"

"And we could be bounced around pretty hard if this blooms while the envelope is retracting!"

Quill hesitated. He did not want his sudden presence in the flow to distract Magda or Leshian. "Did you try—"

"Rouster! Do as I say!"

Quill bit back a response. "Right away."

He brought the engineering board online and pressed his fingers to the panel—

—and fell into an array of lines connected by bright nodes that formed a dense geometric tangle all around him. He searched for the path to the TEG vanes and found them clearly marked in red-orange. He entered the main conduit for the number three vane and let the current drag him along. Through the shimmer of the field he could still see the rest of the flow architecture, dim and contrastless.

He came to a dip in the line, where the color of the surrounding medium had dulled to a flat orange. A pucker opened at the lowest part of the drop. Quill moved out of the conduit to examine the problem and found part of the artificial gravity system attached to the line. He opened the wall of the two conduits to see what was going on. Part of his repair on the gravity had prompted an internal reconfig that used part of the number three vane to establish itself.

The numbers on both conduits told him both systems should work fine even attached like this, but Quill hated compromising the TEG in any way. He looked around for another place to route the gravity through. It required a minimum erg flow...

There, he saw, a disused conduit that still registered open gates. He dragged the gravity line over to it and opened the lifeless gray skin. The configuration looked familiar—heavily shielded, appropriate for an enormous power surge—and he realized with a mild shock that it was military. Curious, he tracked down source and endpoint. The source looked like a cluster of high-capacity nodes tapped directly into the power plant and sharing feed with the shields, but the conduit ended in a cauterized bundle where, Quill

imagined, once had been weapons.

So. Cryshuil used to be military. A converted longhauler, never really intended for combat, but not a poor design for it, either. Just about anything, really, could serve as a firing platform. Back during the Split, Cryshuil had seen action. Maybe.

Quill made sure the conduit powered nothing else, then restored a feed. The line glowed ominously. He attached the gravity line, checked the balance between the two systems, and, satisfied, returned to the TEG conduit to readjust its feed.

Done, he went to the weapons array once more. The sealed end fed the excess energy back down bleeder lines to recycle. Good. Quill ran the numbers. There was a faint trickle of missing energy. Not enough to be a problem, really, but loose ends annoyed him. He followed the loss.

Instead of disappearing through lost heat, though, he found it powering a small node. He touched the pearly sphere—

—and found himself looking down the tunnel rushing toward him, illuminated at its apex by the white brilliance of photons jammed against each other. A faint halo fluoresced around the circumference of the circle, energy sliding around the tip of the conelike TEG field. Somewhere behind him an alarm sounded and the circle expanded suddenly, encompassed his perspective, and Quill tried to grab hold of the nothing around him.

He was in open space, the sharp glint of stars everywhere, in all directions. Panic seized him until he understood what he saw, that he had accessed part of the ship's sensors, and he was "looking" through Cryshuil's "eyes" out across space. The ship had dropped out of translight. They sailed now at high velocity, in "normal" space, toward a point of dim, dim light amid the billion other brighter choices...

His sense reached forward then, propelled through the system by the hint of desire and, vertigo rubbing at his backbrain, the brown dwarf enlarged, became a sphere of muddy storm-coils. Threatening flashes of near-brilliance crossed beneath its smeared surface.

And just beyond it, intimately close by stellar measurements, Quill saw the object Cryshuil's clients had come to see. It looked to him like nothing other than an enormous fragment of an eggshell, slightly curved, its edges oddly jagged. He recognized it from his last run on the *Talleyrand*. An enormous remnant of a made thing, overwhelming in its size and mystery, and yet graspable by the simple use of a word that managed to make it more and less what it was: artifact.

Quill touched the bell beside the compartment door and waited, rocking on his feet. He glanced back down the shaft toward the bridge and exercised another few moments of resentment.

Then the door slid open and Sapur gazed down at him. "Yes?"

"Shipmaster said you wanted to see me, Co Sapur."

The Rahalen stepped back and waved Quill in. Hesitantly, Quill entered the module. He did not know what he expected, but the cabin appeared disappointingly ordinary. Chairs, a desk, a polycom, pillows, and a thick carpet laced with designs in deep green and pale blue. The light seemed a bit too orange.

The Menkan stood near the door at the far end of the room. Sapur gestured to a chair.

"Shipmaster Leshian said you wanted to see me," Quill said. He folded his hands behind his back and remained a meter or so from the exit.

"It did not appear you intended to talk to me on your own," Sapur

said. "Apology for asking your shipmaster to command it."

Quill glanced at the Menkan. "I'm not willing to discuss the *Talleyrand*."

"Even as a favor returned?"

"Pardon?"

Sapur sat down. "I secured your position on this ship. You were hired at my request."

"Why?"

"Because you were on the *Tall'rand*. Because you experienced something important. Because I wanted to repay another favor." The Rahalen folded its hands around a knee in a jarringly human gesture. "The description I have states that Quill, a co-engineer on the *Tall'rand*, was linked to the ship's argus when the collision alarm went off. That before anyone else could enter the flow, the *Tall'rand* registered the presence of another vessel of substantial mass, attempted to veer off while trying to warn the other ship and, instead of striking it, passed through where the ship had been, striking nothing. Two seconds later the entire volume of space around the *Tall'rand* was instantly blanketed with highly energetic gases. That the co-engineer, still linked into the argus, began shutting the ship's functions off, starting with life support—"

"All right," Quill said. "You know what happened, you know who I am. What's there to discuss? If you're worried that I intend to try to destroy this ship or stop this commission, don't be. I have no intention of doing so."

"You are certain?"

"Yes."

"Would you tell us why?"

"Why what?"

"Please, sit down. I offer refreshment."

"Thank you, no. Why what?"

"Two things. First, why did you attempt to murder your ship and, second, why are you certain you won't try to again?"

"That's my concern."

"I disagree. Our being passengers, I think, earns us the right to demand reassurance. That we are also clients privileges us to have a say in how the commission is executed."

"In other words, I could be relieved of my position."

Sapur did not answer. Quill made himself shrug and slouched in the chair opposite the Rahalen. He glared at the seti, but he could not decipher its face to tell if he made any impression.

He started when the Menkan touched his face with a single thin limb.

"So whose expedition is this?" Quill asked. "Yours or Co Persal's?"

"Both," Sapur said. "I have worked with Co Persal for several years. We have found a number of methods for combining separate interests."

"You aren't interested in the Fragment then?"

"No. The Lyra Construct and its companions are no mystery for us."

"You know what it is?"

"Yes."

"Have you told Persal? The others?"

"No. But Co Persal's colleagues are on the correct path. They largely understand it. Persal has a theory about its age and origin which is not shared by others, therefore he has had difficulties finding support." Sapur cocked its head. "If you wonder why I don't simply give him the answer, it is because he doesn't want it. Not like a gift. It is more important for him to find out than to know."

Quill straightened in the chair. "What are you looking for?"

"I am not looking for anything. My friend here, Mysqual, is looking for what you apparently found. I am here primarily to arrange the opportunity."

Quill looked at the Menkan. Close up the mass of tendrils seemed

to glisten, like well-oiled skin. It smelled...vaguely acid. At the same time the patterns that the long limbs made twined in and out of each other fascinated him.

He sighed. "You go along, doing the best you can, making a few mistakes now and then. People forgive, they forget, you try harder, you get better. Then, just about when you think you've got it down, one thing happens that changes it all. One incident no one forgets, no one forgives, that you can't undo, can't get around, can't even walk away from. Your whole life reduces to that point and it decides everything from then on. Do you know what I mean?"

"Profoundly," Sapur said.

Quill looked at Mysqual. "How can I help?"

Mysqual's voice seemed farther away than the rest of him.

"Answer my question?"

Quill swallowed. "I'll try."

The bay doors opened outward and the shuttle lifted off the deck. He glanced at the telemetry on the remotes, then at the port view, and saw the squat manta shapes lifting and moving forward. Ahead, he saw the bay doors recede above and below, leaving him to stare across limitless night. Quill felt his pulse pick up.

The other two shuttles moved away from him. On his board he watched their tracks, just as his own shuttle changed vector and increased velocity to assume its position as one point of an enormous triangle. *Cryshuil* would form the apex of a tetrahedron once they reached their places just inside the orbit of the Fragment, as Persal had dubbed the huge plate.

The dwarf was a solid spot of dully glowing orange on the infrared monitor, like an ember, invisible in standard spectrum. The Fragment orbited the almost-star about 11 million kilometers out. Quill could not see it except by the background it occluded. Sensors built up a combined radar and infrared image for him. The irregular mass had a surface area of nearly 23 billion kilometers, a fraction of the total area if, as Persal now suggested, it had once been part of a complete sphere. That number edged toward meaninglessness for Quill. Distances he could grasp, but more as a function of time than actual space. A sphere nearly a 140 quintillion kilometers in area...he blinked at the Fragment glowing silver against a reddish background on the screen.

And somebody made it...

Somehow, though, he felt less impressed than when he first saw it. His conversation with Sapur and Mysqual had blunted his enthusiasm, dredged up questions and doubts he wanted left buried. He resented it, resented them. He had sensed dissatisfaction from Mysqual.

"You touched it," the Menkan had said, "you joined with it. What did it give you?"

"I don't know."

"It changed you. How?"

"I don't know."

"Why did you try to kill your ship?"

"It just seemed...necessary."

"Because of what it gave you?"

"Maybe."

"Do you want to know?"

He had no answer for that. He had never known what the encounter had done to him and in the time since he had learned ways around his ignorance that had allowed him to believe it had not been so important. He had hoped to reach a point where it no longer mattered.

The shuttle's system stepped up its magnification. Again. His main

view now showed a vast black patch spreading across nearly 40 degrees of sky. Then 50. Finally there was nothing on the screen. The sensor image showed a textured surface, scarred and pocked but unbroken.

The shuttle fell past the edge and stars appeared on the main screen once more.

"Check your readings, rouster," Persal's voice came over his com. "Verify thickness, please."

Quill passed the rim of the Fragment, entering within its orbit.

"Thickness is...seven kilometers...?"

"Seven? Did you say seven, rouster?"

"Yes, co, seven km."

"Thank you."

The ship slowed, came to a stop. Quill watched the program direct the remotes to their various destinations—each shuttle had direct control of nine (two from each headed to the far side of the system eventually to take positions at the opposite curve of the Fragment's orbit)—forming an array over and around the Fragment.

"Initiate sensor matrix on my mark," Persal said. "Four...three...two...one...mark."

Quill touched a contact on his board and waited. Bank by bank, system indicators came up. The remotes—except for those still headed across the system—and the shuttles all linked with *Cryshuil's* data array. The fingers of their machines reached out.

Quill closed down the shuttle's

systems gratefully. He eased out of the couch, his muscles threatening to cramp, and stretched. He felt agitated despite his tiredness. His shoulder twinged and he reached back to knead it gently as he headed for the lock.

The past several days had been a series of 12-to-15-hour shifts, a frenzy of shoving remotes, making new links, moving equipment, ferrying. Persal and his team walked around with unconscious smiles all the time, all of them working even longer hours than *Cryshuil's* crew, emerged in their bliss.

Magda approached him from the other shuttle. "Good job, rouster. Chaphma and I will handle inspection. Why don't you go find some sleep."

Quill nodded. "Where's Dobbs?"

"Down in his hole probably. Why?"

"He just hasn't been around much these past few days."

"He doesn't want to be anywhere near the setis. I've seen it before. He's all right."

Quill wanted to argue. The last couple of times he had seen Dobbs he could not help thinking that something *was* wrong.

"Does the shipmaster—?"

"You've been out nine hours," Magda cut him off. "Go sleep. Trust me, there will be plenty to do later."

Quill gave in, relieved. He watched Magda climb into the shuttle lock, then headed for the bay access.

He stepped out of the ring shunt onto his level. He reached the crew quarters, deciding on the way not to bother with a shower.

He rubbed his eyes and opened the hatch.

Dobbs looked up from where he sat on Quill's bunk.

"Is anyone with you?" he asked quietly.

"No. They could use you down in the bay—"

Dobbs shook his head and stood. "I won't touch anything a seti's been over."

"Co, excuse me, but I really need sleep."

"What do you think it is?"

Quill stared at Dobbs for a few seconds. "You mean the Fragment? I don't know. A city maybe? Ask Co Persal, he'll be happy to have someone to tell his ideas to."

"What do you *think* it is? Guess if you have to."

The faint tremor in Dobbs' voice set Quill's nerves on edge. He made himself study the engineer closer. He seemed anxious, tentative. He ran his left hand along his hip as if trying to wipe it clean.

"Sure, I think it's a city of some kind. Maybe a lot of cities."

"Seti."

"We didn't build it."

"We. You mean humans. Humans didn't build it."

"Right."

Dobbs seemed to relax slightly. "You're a Prioritist, right? Thought so first time I saw your pouch. None of my business, so I didn't say anything."

"Is it your business now?"

"Could be. You been talking to Katin, I know that. She was on *Talleyrand*, I guess that's why. Sooner or later everybody knows everybody in this job. I didn't want Leshian to take this commission, not when I found out there'd be setis. Why do you suppose they're along?"

Quill did not know if what Sapur and Mysqual had told him was confidential, but discretion seemed safer. "They said. We're in seti territory. Menkan."

"Diplomats. You believe that? I mean, merchants run these lanes all the time, they don't need a seti rep on board."

"Sapur is Persal's liaison, not ours." Quill leaned back against the bulkhead, his impatience stirring. "Look, co, I've just spent nine hours in a shuttle. I'm exhausted."

"They knew that thing was here!"

"Who?"

"The Rahalen and that thing with it!"

"The Menkan?"

"Setis, I don't care what they call themselves. They *knew* we'd find that thing! They came along because they knew it was here. The question is why."

Of course they knew, Quill thought, *they've been out here longer...* "I think I want you to leave."

"Listen! We don't know what that thing is, we don't know what they want with it. I'd rather not know—"

Quill grunted. "Would you? I can't wait to find out what it is."

"Doesn't sound Prioritist to me. Not losing your focus, now, are you?"

"What would a vacuum-skulled Returnist know about Prioritism?"

Dobbs flinched, raised his hands, palms out. "You're not so different. There's One Thing, only one, and you have to keep it central, keep it in sight. You can't let yourself be distracted, because that way lies confusion. You'll forget who you are. I can overlook the corruption of implants because the idea's right. There's only One Thing. We can't lose that. We mix with setis and next thing, everything human gets called into question, everything that's important to who we are. Where we belong."

Quill opened the hatch. "Right now I belong in bed."

Dobbs pointed at him. "Got to watch them, rouster. Got to be mindful. You're dangerously drawn to that thing. Don't lose your bliss to idle curiosity. Watch them." He rubbed his eyes suddenly. "I really wish you hadn't fixed the gravity." He sniffed loudly and looked at Quill again. "Watch them, rouster."

Quill jerked his thumb toward the open doorway. Dobbs nodded, blinking furiously, and stepped through. The door slid shut and Quill punched in the lock code. He considered calling Magda and telling her what had just happened. Dobbs made him uneasy. But she said she had seen this before, that it was usual with Dobbs.

He showered and padded to his bunk. For a time he lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Finally, he went to the monitor and tapped into

the sensor feed. After a short search he found the image from the remote array of the Fragment.

He dimmed the cabin lights and left the view on the screen. He stretched out on the nearest bunk and propped his head up on three pillows. He fell asleep staring at it.

"Rouster! Report to the bridge!"

He sat up in the half-light, blinking furiously, trying to slow his breathing.

"Rouster! We have a problem!"

He staggered to the comm and banged at the contact.

"Quill here. Sorry. What—?"

"Report to the bridge, rouster," Magda repeated. "Sorry to cut your sleep short. Something's happened."

"What?"

"We may have lost a shuttle. Get up here."

Quill found Persal and the

Rahalen on the bridge, crammed into the suddenly inadequate space with Leshian, Magda, and Risher.

"Where's Dobbs?" Magda asked.

"I don't know. Isn't he—?"

"Never mind now," Leshian said. "We have some difficulty."

Risher straightened in his couch and ran the back of his hand over his mouth. "Nothing. Her comm shows active and we're still receiving some telemetry via the remotes, but she's not answering. No bio signs. Elevated radiation levels—"

"How elevated?" both Persal and Leshian asked at the same time.

"Forty points. It's come down."

Quill waited. Persal whispered something to Sapur.

"Communication is essential, Co Persal," Leshian said.

Persal reddened slightly. "Apologies. I asked Co Sapur if there had been any radiation measured at the appearance of the Intruder. Apparently not. High neutrino count, no more."

"Intruder?" Quill asked, feeling suddenly anxious.

Leshian looked at him blankly for a second. "Show him."

Persal gestured for him to come closer to one of the auxiliary stations. "About 20 minutes ago," he said in a low, slightly shaky voice, "Parter reported a peculiar increase in the local neutrino count. Almost immediately, this happened—." He touched a contact and one of the screens displayed a composite image.

At first Quill saw nothing but the distant edge of the Fragment, hanging over an abyss of stars. Then a line appeared, as if someone had taken a knife and sliced space from near the top of the screen to the bottom. The bright trace thickened, became a solid bar, then a flat plane. It looked like something being pushed through the slit. The shape "rolled" out to become a long, crystalline spindle—but dimensionless, like a drawing. As he watched, it drifted to one side, gained mass, depth.

Exactly like the one *Talleyrand* had nearly struck. Quill stared at it, transfixed.

"Shortly after this appeared we lost comm with Parter."

Quill licked his lips. "Have you tried the link? She's got the interface—"

"Nothing. We can get the shuttle to acknowledge us, but that's all, and Parter's not in the flow."

Quill ran his thumbs over the tips of his fingers. He wanted to link. He wanted to squeeze himself through a comm channel and touch it. The desire frightened him. He knew what they were going to ask him

to do and he longed for it and feared it and hoped they would not, knowing that if they did not he would beg them to go. The object drew him, focused his want, and he hated it and loved it.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he glanced back to see Magda. "Go out there and see what happened to our client."

In the bay, the Menkan waited.

Quill hesitated and gave Magda a questioning look.

"Co Sapur insists," she said. "Persal agrees. Mysqual is a—I can't pronounce the Menkan or Rahalen word—a synthesist."

"I come to observe," the seti said, its voice melodic and genderless.

"In any case," Magda said, "we don't have time to argue about it."

Quill shrugged and gestured for it to follow.

"Good luck, rouster," Magda called and hurried up to the observation blister.

Quill ran through a systems diagnostic while he powered up. He turned to see if the Menkan needed any help with the couch, but the seti had managed to fit itself into the human-designed platform. Several limbs tugged straps into place.

"Ready?" Quill asked.

The Menkan raised several tendrils in what seemed a gesture of assent. Quill initiated launch. The bay doors swung out and the shuttle lifted on its agravs. He eased forward. Clear of the bay, he increased velocity toward the edge of the Fragment.

"*Cryshuil*, I'm setting sensors to maximum range. I'm keeping an eye on the radiation count, but if your feed shows anything I might miss—"

"On it, rouster," Magda came back.

In the silence, Quill stared at the readouts and tried to forget Mysqual's presence. He did not want to offend it by staring and he had no idea what to say to it. He became aware of a faint sweet odor.

But the agitation in the back of his mind, like scattered bits of memory that would not quite coalesce into a recognizable form, worked at him as he watched the screens and his approach to the new object.

"Do you know what it is?" he asked finally. His voice trembled slightly; he cleared his throat, embarrassed.

The Menkan unfurled a few limbs and retucked them, but remained silent. Feeling rebuffed, Quill returned his attention to his console.

"Which?" Mysqual asked finally.

Quill blinked at it. "The Intruder."

"Cannot say."

Quill sighed and concentrated on the instruments.

He brought the shuttle around the Fragment, then locked onto Parter's beacon and let the ship follow it.

"*Cryshuil*, I'm closing now. Anything?"

"Clear field, rouster," Magda said.

As he drew nearer he saw nothing. Then he picked out the absence of background, the blank shape where stars should have been. On his screens, the Intruder showed as a silver-gray length, like a stretched-out diamond. He found the shuttle, a speck beside the gigantic form, holding station nearly two hundred kilometers from the tip.

"I see running lights, *Cryshuil*. Closing."

The Intruder swelled to overwhelm his screens. For a moment vertigo and fear threatened him. He was fascinated and scared. He stepped up the magnification on the shuttle, eliminating the vast form from his screens, focused his attention on Parter's shuttle.

"No external damage visible. No increase in radiation."

"Confirmed, rouster. Proceed."

Quill brought his shuttle against Parter's and initiated the autodocking. Magnetic grapples found their counterparts and pulled the locks

together. A faint shudder ran through the ship as the umbilical sealed. "Sending remote probe."

Quill waited while the small device entered the other shuttle and tested the environment. One of his monitors flared red.

"Radiation," he reported. "I need to use a shell."

He unbuckled from the couch and floated toward the airlock. He glanced back and saw that the Menkan was staying in its couch. Relieved, he opened the locker and started putting on the bulky EVA shell.

The diagnostic indicated that all the seals were tight and the portable shield was operative. He cycled through the lock and pulled himself along the lightless umbilical toward the glowing strip of red that outlined the other lock.

Once through, he sealed the lock and entered the shuttle.

All the system indicators glowed. At first look nothing seemed damaged. He swam forward to the pilot's couch. He caught himself on the back of the seat and eased around—

—and jerked back at once. He closed his eyes and felt himself tremble briefly. He took a deep breath and looked again.

Parter's body was blackened and pocked by severe radiation burns. One eye stared blindly, the other almost closed, a thin cloud of blood drifting from mouth and nose toward the vents. Quill's stomach lurched, but he fought the nausea and made himself look over the console. The comm light for incoming signals winked on and off. He touched the contact to shut it off, then jacked his shell comm into the board.

"Parter is dead, *Cryshuil*. Massive radiation exposure. All other systems online. I don't see—"

One bank of monitors was dead. Quill tapped contacts.

"One system down, the link to the external remotes. Zero function."

"Rouster," Magda said, "do you have mobility?"

"Yes." He glanced at Parter again and again forced himself to look away. He ran the diagnostics and watched the status board. He blinked, surprised: this was the shuttle modified for the setis. "I have function in everything but that link. Internal radiation levels are still at plus 15 optimum...contamination in biomass and atmosphere recycle...nothing we can't scrub."

"Do not scrub, rouster. Bring it in as is."

"Uh...what about my shuttle, *Cryshuil*?"

"Bring them both back."

"Right."

Steeling himself, Quill started removing Parter from the couch. Bits of skin flaked from her face and neck and clumps of hair broke loose. As carefully as he could, he stowed the body in one of the fold-down cots and strapped it in.

He checked his dosimeter—plenty of time to get the shuttles back to *Cryshuil*—and strapped himself into the co-pilot's couch to begin slaving the two shuttles together for the trip back.

"You might have left Co Mysqual there," Sapur said. "It would have been content to serve."

The Menkan stood beside the Rahalen, its tendrils folding and unfolding, giving Quill the impression of agitation. It said nothing, though.

Persal fidgeted in his seat, drumming his fingers arrhythmically.

"No one stays out there alone," Leshian says. "Not til we are satisfied about safety."

"But the remotes—" Persal began.

"Are being managed from here, Co Persal," Magda said. "The lag

time is a little longer, not much. They'll keep til we sort this out."

Persal seemed about to protest, but he shrugged and propped his chin on his hand and stared at the table morosely.

"May we have your data?" Leshian asked Shell.

Her eyes glistened redly. She wiped at them and leaned toward her console. The new object appeared above the table. Quill tried to imagine its size—it still agitated him almost uncontrollably—but reduced like this to fit into their midst it seemed almost ordinary.

"We have," Shell said, her voice weak and uncertain, "...something...29 kilometers long, five across at its widest. Surface appears completely smooth. No seams that we can discern. It may be a solid object, but if so it's a very light material. The recordings from—what we recovered indicate almost no gravimetric variation."

She changed the view to the recording of its appearance. Now, though, it was filled out, three-dimensional. Quill walked around "behind" it. At first he saw nothing. Then a point appeared, becoming one end of the Intruder, lengthening til the opposite end emerged out of the blackness. The two ends seemed to grow toward each other until the complete object floated in space, where it had not been seconds before. How many seconds, he wondered, two? three?

He looked up and caught Magda watching him, her eyes narrowed.

"The increase in neutrino count began four seconds prior to the first sighting, dropped to normal less than a second after the entire thing became..." Shell shrugged and glanced around. "Became."

"It is asymmetrical," Sapur said.

People shifted to see. Quill stepped to his left. One half of the diamond did seem to have "slid" forward. The center line from one view angled through the other.

No one said anything more until Leshian snorted. "We would appreciate speculation if nothing else. Rouster, any idea where the radiation came from?"

"No. I stored the shuttle in the isolation bay. I haven't had time to go through it yet."

"You and Chaphma, do that now."

Chaphma rose from the table and scowled at Leshian, then at Quill. He jerked his head to one side and Quill followed him from the conference room.

"Where is Dobbs?" Chaphma asked.

"I don't know. Do we need him?"

"No, I suppose not. Three of us might make a mess."

They reached the lock outside the isolation bay in silence. As Chaphma stripped down and began pulling on his liner, Quill stared at the sigils all over his body.

"Something on your mind?" Chaphma asked.

"I've never seen that..." he gestured at Chaphma's designs, "...before."

"I am Tinal. I was born on Faron."

Quill nodded, unsure how to respond. He finished climbing into his own shell then led the way down the short tunnel into the isolation bay. They stepped into the observation blister and waited for the lock to cycle shut. Below, the shuttle stood in the center of a plain bay that exhibited none of the clutter of the main dock. Quill guessed that this was the first time it had ever been used.

The hatch down to the deck opened and they climbed down. Chaphma held a scanner up and studied it.

"Three counts above norm," he said.

Inside the count jumped to 15, still steady from when Quill had first found Parter's body. "Internal logs gave a peak count of 48. Life signs lasted maybe 10 minutes into that."

Chaphma nodded mutely and connected a snake to his scanner. He began running it over the console, the couches, the surface mat-

ting, searching for high readings.

"I'm going to check that external link," Quill said.

He knelt down and unbolted the deck panel behind the couches, then pried it up. He switched on a light and shined it into the compartment. Modules, cables, and panels showed signs of melting. Quill whistled.

"What?" Chaphma asked and bent over the opening. "Oh." He lowered the snake. "This is it. I'm reading 28 still." He wound the probe up and knelt opposite Quill. "What the—?"

Quill pointed. "Look, there. One of the new components." The module had burst open like a seed pod. The inside was black and the worst of the heat damage was immediately around it.

"Can't get to it from here," Chaphma said. "Have to open the bottom plate."

"I didn't see a power surge indicated on any of the logs, did you?"

"No." Chaphma sat back. "The batteries in these things—"

"Not big enough. The shielding would have handled it."

For an instant Chaphma looked frightened. Then he shook his head and stood.

"I had nothing to do with this," Chaphma said.

Quill looked up. "Is there some reason someone might think you did?"

"I'm Tinal. Orthodox. She was Redactive."

"Tinal?"

"They claim. But they won't wear the sigils." He tapped his fingers on his faceplate. "They're ashamed. Some—the worst ones, those who once followed the true path—have them removed. She was one of those."

"So she was outcast?"

Chaphma gave Quill an odd look, half-amused. "No. Her kind represent the mainstream of Tinal now. The orthodox are the outcast. I left Faron 18 years ago, hoping never to see one of their blank faces again."

"Hell of a sacrifice," Quill said.

"No. I carry my home in my soul." He knelt again. "Funny you should put it that way, though. Sacrifice is the heart of Tinal. Our lives are a journey to find what we are a sacrifice to. We give up everything to the journey. Life is a sacrifice."

Quill gestured toward the pilot's couch. "Then maybe she found it?"

Chaphma scowled. "What would you understand about sacrifice?"

Before Quill could answer, Chaphma stood and stomped out of the shuttle. Quill waited while his guilt and embarrassment subsided, then while his anger cooled.

"Sabotage," Chaphma said.

Quill fidgeted in the close confines of the shipmaster's quarters. He glanced at Magda, standing against the far wall between a closet door and a locker welded to the bulkhead. The four of them seemed to fill the space, even though there was ample room.

Leshian frowned. "You're sure?"

Chaphma pointed to the display on Leshian's desk. The burned, burst module rotated slowly. "This was a backup component. As best we can tell, it contained a thermal cap, probably a five-gram core."

"What triggered it?"

"No way to tell. Everything slagged in the eruption. I'm even guessing the size of the device based on the collateral damage and the radiation levels."

"And the other modules?"

"Rouster and I went through all the rest. This was the only one rigged."

Quill fidgeted. Everyone knew it was the seti shuttle. Everyone knew he had been the one to do all the modifications on it. He could not stop meeting Magda's gaze, even knowing how guilty it made him seem.

Leshian steepled her fingers and tapped her lower lip. "Co Persal doesn't know?"

"It's your place to inform the client."

"Yes..." She sighed tiredly. "We are not pleased. Recommendations?"

"I think," Magda said, "we should return to Markab and turn it over to port authority. Let them investigate."

"Do you think we'd get our license back afterward? Especially if it's found to be one of our crew?"

"You don't think it was one of the clients, do you?"

"No...maybe. What would be the motive?" She looked sharply at Chaphma. "It wasn't you."

Chaphma's face reddened. His sigils blazed for a moment. "No."

Leshian nodded. "We didn't really think so." She stood and switched off the display. "Co Persal has already expressed the desire to continue his survey. Now more than ever, with this new thing. You're sure there's no way for this to be connected to that object?"

"I don't see how," Chaphma said. "Except for a surge in neutrinos, it appeared without a ripple."

"Still, it might be. So what we have decided is to stay here and allow Co Persal to continue. Pay attention to the shuttles. We want them watched. Katin is to sequester all remaining components and keep strict logs. No one touches any of them without a witness and a log entry."

"Do you think it might happen again?" Quill asked.

"What would be the point of sabotaging one shuttle, rouster?"

Leshian switched on the display again and changed images. Now the Intruder floated above her desk.

"For our part, we would also like to know what that is. Wouldn't you?"

Quill felt himself nod, staring at the object. *Yes*, he thought, *yes*, *I would very much like to know what it is*. The intensity of the desire frightened him.

"All right, then. Not a word to anyone else. Routine where possible. Let's serve our clients."

Quill left Leshian's quarters and headed for the shunt.

"Rouster," Magda called. She caught up with him. "Where are you going?"

"The bay."

"Good."

They waited silently together for the shunt to make its way around the ring.

"Do you have any opinions, rouster?" she asked the moment the door closed.

"Who did it, you mean? No. Not Chaphma."

"You sound certain."

"It doesn't feel right. For one, how would he know which shuttle Parter would use?"

"That leaves Dobbs."

"Or me."

"Or you." She touched a contact and the shunt stopped. "You were the one from the *Talleyrand*. What happened there?"

"You don't know?"

"I've seen the official report, I know the rumors. I know you've been shut out of every posting you've tried to get for the last three years. Long time for a spacer to be groundbound. Did you try to shut your ship down and kill everyone?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Something...it seemed like the only thing to do."

"Your one true shape maybe?"

Quill stared at her. She did not look away, only sighed.

"You don't think you might try it again?"

"Why would I? And where would I get the device? Besides, like you suggest, I'm a Prioritist. That's not what I'm about."

Magda pursed her lips. "What do you think that thing out there is?"

Quill was disconcerted by the abrupt change of topic. He leaned against the wall. "Looks like a ship to me. But..."

"Does it scare you?"

"Yes."

"Why? It's just another seti object."

"You checked my record. You heard the rumors. I saw one before."

Magda nodded. "And right afterward you tried to destroy your own ship. Coincidence?"

Quill waited her out. He had nothing to say anyway. He could deny the implications, defend himself, but there was no point.

"Can you assure me it wasn't you?" Magda asked. "And that you won't do here what you did aboard the *Talleyrand*?"

"What happened then won't happen now."

"Why not? Are we protected by your faith?"

"Faith doesn't protect you."

She blinked, then laughed. "You're the first one I've ever heard admit that." She shook her head and recovered her composure. "Seven crew, four clients. Katin was right, we're resource short for this commission. Nothing we can do about that now. Do you have any idea how we're going to keep track of everyone?"

"No. But I marked all the new modules. If any of them are tampered with or changed, I'll know."

Magda studied him for a long pause, then nodded. She started the shunt again. "I suppose you're going to inspect them all before they go out?"

"They're out for 15 to 20 hours at a time, it won't be that hard."

"All right."

"I'll see to it you get informed." The door opened. "In the meantime, I want to find Dobbs."

"Rouster. Why do the setis want you here? We wouldn't have hired you without their insistence. Why?"

"I have no idea. Ask them."



Quill banged on the engineering

hatch and waited. He pressed the comm switch on the bulkhead and hammered again, then touched a fingertip to the interface panel. He overrode the lock and the hatch slid open.

"Dobbs?"

In positive gee the module looked even more confusing, though it appeared nothing had shifted. The icons hung where they had been, on stiff supports, cluttering the space between the workbenches and consoles. Some of the consoles, though, were mounted to the bulkheads at odd orientations, not at all awkward for zero gee, but now disorienting. Still, he could see all the way to the opposite end of the compartment, and Dobbs was absent.

The air smelled. Near the back Quill found a bunk pulled down from the bulkhead and a pile of clothes jammed underneath it. All the counterspace contained clutter, half-assembled components, testers, parts, tools. He wondered what Dobbs did when the gravity cut out suddenly, the way Magda had told him it sometimes did. Most of this stuff would drift.

But nothing had been afloat the first time he had been here...

Quill ducked beneath one of the workbenches and switched on his handlamp. Cables and components ran along the wall: stasis field. Dobbs counted on the gravity going out. Quill wondered why Leshian had not thrown him off long ago. It took time to assemble this much accreted incompetence.

No, he thought, *not incompetence, just stubbornness*. He had adapted this whole section for work in zero gee and the only thing Quill had found on board that did not work was the gravity. The shuttles were in excellent operating order, the TEG worked, all the shunt rings, the environmental, the slave systems for the supplementals, guidance, the sensor array. It all functioned well. Only the gravity had been a problem and the glitch Quill had fixed had not been that difficult to find.

He examined the assorted clutter on the other benches—old components, sheets of conductile material, adhesives, stacks of datachits, tools. It appeared as though Dobbs kept half a dozen projects going at once. Quill recognized little.

He stopped before a bench near the rear of the module. The light was bad and the junk possessed a quality of neglect, the way it was shoved into piles on either side. A space just left of center was cleared off. Quill shined his handlamp up the bulkhead to the ceiling. He climbed onto the bench and reached up. A section of the paneling shifted. When he pushed harder it receded on hinges.

The crawlspace extended forward along the ship's core. As far as Quill could tell it belonged to no part of the embedded systems. Just an empty space in between everything else. In the glow of his lamp he saw signs that it had been sealed against leaks; conduit ran here and there, entering and leaving the close walls without a sign of what it did. Old markings still showed, faded and scratched almost to illegibility, numbers and letters in bright orange and yellow and red. Twenty meters from the access it widened out. Heat-scored, dusty receptors and jacks covered three surfaces, the fourth being a plate welded in to seal off another duct.

Military, Quill realized, recalling the bypassed artery in the ship's datasphere. Weapons systems had been ripped out of here and the spaces left behind, in case it might ever be necessary to put them back. He wondered if Leshian even knew about this. It should have been sealed off completely, left airless or at least unscrubbed. Quill sniffed; the atmosphere was clean, regularly serviced.

He opened his mouth to call out, then paused. Maybe it would be better to let Magda know, get a couple more people in here. But Dobbs had let Quill see part of this in the flow, had almost insisted that he go in and find it. Maybe—

"Good boy, you found it. Now what do you want, rouser?" Dobbs's voice echoed flatly.

"Dobbs?"

"What do you want?"

"We're concerned about you."

"Concerned."

"Yes, concerned. Worried. There was an accident, Dobbs, maybe you didn't hear—"

"I heard. Wasn't an accident."

"No?"

"Not entirely."

"Dobbs, why don't you come out and talk about it."

"I wish you hadn't fixed the damn gravity, rouser."

Silence stretched. Quill moved forward. When he got to the other side of the big junction he turned off his handlamp. Far down the length of the shaft he saw brassy light.

"I'm not coming out, rouser. Not while setis are on board. Get those motherless bastards off the ship and I'll tell you all what happened."

"One of the clients died. Parter, the motilist. She was using the shuttle I modified for the setis."

"She shouldn't have been in it. She shouldn't have been where she was."

Quill crawled as fast as he could manage. His breath came faster and a bead of sweat rolled into his right eye. He flinched and wiped at it.

"I'm not coming out."

The light grew brighter as he got nearer and Quill saw that it spilled from a connecting duct. He slowed and moved toward it quietly.

He peered around the corner. Dobbs sat against the far wall in a chamber that looked like a service node. He had propped a lamp against the wall to his left, crates stacked to his right. Dobbs kept his eyes squeezed shut, one hand hovering by his temple, trembling. His skin glowed with a slick sweaty sheen.

"Dobbs?"

"I'm not coming out."

Quill climbed into the nodule. Parts covered the floor between them, small eggs, some open and revealing dark clusters of small beads and wires wrapped in conductilate, and battery packs.

"Get out of here, rouser. I didn't ask you here."

"Sure you did. You look sick, Dobbs. Maybe you ought to let Chaphma have a look at you."

"Chaphma. I bet he's pleased Parter's dead."

"Why should he be?"

"He hates her kind. I told him what she was. I didn't know about the feud, I just thought it was an interesting bit of data. She was from Faron, he was from Faron, I found out, I told him. Is he happy?"

"Magda thought maybe he sabotaged the shuttle."

Dobbs opened one eye. "*Chaphma*? That's too funny. She should think it was you. You're the one with the death wish."

"Why do you say that?"

"I had a friend who served on the *Talleyrand*." Dobbs shook his head. "Not your fault, though, was it? You didn't know any better. They made you do it."

"Who?"

Dobbs lunged toward him, face stretched and dark. "The setis! Who else? You touched that seti ship and learned to hate yourself! It taught you to kill! Who else? The setis!"

Quill suppressed the urge to back into the shaft. He did not look away from Dobbs. The engineer eased back. He groped on the floor amid the debris and picked up a small box.

"It was for the setis. But then it appeared. I saw it. Just like the last one. I saw it. I knew it was going to talk to you, tell you to kill us all. The shuttle was right next to it. It should have gone up." He dropped the box. "Old shit. Leftovers. Some of it wasn't very well made to begin with. Some of these devices are over a century old, did you know that?"

"You were going to kill Sapur and Mysqual."

"I tried to save you. All of us. You have to decide sometimes, yes or no, one thing or the other. No compromise." He scowled. "Has it started talking to you yet?"

"You shit. That was four years ago."

"Can't change the past, rouser. It's always with you." He gestured at Quill's hands. "You didn't cut it out of you. It's still there."

"People can forget! Unless some shit keeps reminding them! You bastard!"

Dobbs crawled toward him. "Keep your opinions to yourself, you piece of—" He stopped, his face contorting painfully. "I wish you hadn't fixed the gravity." He reared back and threw his right fist at Quill's face.

Quill leaned back and caught the blow on his shoulder. He grabbed Dobbs's arm, but the man was strong and almost pulled him all the

way alongside him when he cocked his arm for another punch. Quill hung on and got his knees under him. Dobbs curled his arm around Quill's head and started to squeeze. Quill rammed his elbow repeatedly into Dobbs's ribs.

Suddenly the engineer shuddered, released his grip, and fell backward. Quill stared down at him. Dobbs's mouth gaped wide and his hands pressed against his eyes and forehead. A high keening cry escaped Dobbs, like air forced through a tiny hole.

Quill took hold of Dobbs's arms and began wrestling him out of the node and down the long shaft.

The medunit readouts flickered.

Chaphma made adjustments, his face grim, sigils moving with the twitch of his jaw. Dobbs's head lay encased in a flexible bowl that gripped his skull just above the brow ridge, like an artificial mouth.

"Tumor," Magda said. "He faked his last few medicals. But that's not the best part—or worst. He used to have a full interface. He had it removed when he became a Returnist."

"How? You can't get all that out, it's too deep—"

"Had it blocked off, isolated. The tumor developed around one of the nodes."

"He kept complaining about the gravity," Quill said. "Zero gee must have made it bearable."

Magda turned away and tapped his shoulder. Quill followed her out of the infirmary. "Sapur and Mysqual want you to take them out to the Intruder."

"I don't think I want to do that."

Magda narrowed her eyes. "Really?"

He looked away. *No, not really, what I want more than anything is to go out there and...what? I don't know. But wanting it so bad scares me.*

"Unless you've got a really good reason not to, that's what you'll do. Persal and Leshian have already been over it with them and they're insisting. I wasn't in the meeting, I don't know what was said, but the word is you go."

Quill nodded.

"This is what they wanted you for, rouser."

"Did they tell you that?"

"No. But it makes sense. My question is, why?"

"I really couldn't tell you." He looked back into the infirmary. "Will he be all right?"

Magda shrugged. "I don't know. Chaphma's worried."

Quill rubbed his eyes, hoping for a good excuse to back out of what Magda asked of him. But it seemed right, even to him. Perhaps especially to him.

"When do they want me to take them out?"

Quill installed the seti interpreter

and made a few other modifications in the shuttle equipped with the direct interface. He took it out manually, the routine giving him distraction from his fear. If either of the seti noticed they kept quiet about it. By the time he had cleared the bay and the Fragment filled his main screen he felt almost calm.

"Bring us along the spine facing the Fragment, please," Sapur asked.

The Fragment hove to starboard, a vast plate like a wall between universes. The Intruder floated in the center of his screens, marked by locator lights. Quill found Chaphma's shuttle, also lit, holding station nearer the surface of the Fragment. Quill approached the Intruder.

Sapur reached to the comm console and began tapping in commands. Quill watched for a few seconds, then checked their position. He leveled out four hundred meters above the surface.

This near, the Intruder's apparent smoothness disappeared under the abrasions of age. The scuffs, dents, scratches, and ripples of long use textured its skin.

The seti spoke quietly to each other.

"Something?" Quill asked.

"Bring us to a stop above the locus," Sapur said.

Quill slowed the shuttle along the spine, damping its momentum gradually until it came to a halt over the cross. Sapur touched a contact, sending a signal.

"Please," the Menkan said, stretching a pair of its tendrils to tap the interface panel. "Link with it."

"No."

"Please."

Quill turned to look at the seti, his stomach turning cold. "Why?"

"We ask."

"No. I did that once."

"That," Sapur said, "is why we brought you. That is why Mysqual insisted."

Quill started working at his restraints, his hands shaking. "Last time I ended up groundbound for four years and suicidal. No."

"Don't you want to?" Sapur asked.

Quill hesitated. Yes, he did. Ever since he first saw it he had wanted to send himself down a commlink and touch it. He wanted to with the same insistent sense of rightness by which he had tried to shut down the *Talleyrand* and later kill himself. He had never experienced such a deep split between his desires and his consciousness. He tried to summon a lesson to center himself, but as he stared at the image of the Intruder he could think of only one thing.

Is this my bliss?

"Please," Mysqual repeated. "Touch it."

Like a door closing with a delicate, sharp click, he relaxed, reached forward, and spread his hands against the interface. He kept a firewall between himself and a full link, half in and half out, and watched the monitors. A thin cord shot from the commlink toward the Intruder. Something fragile and coral blossomed at the other end. Quill looked closer.

The locus of the huge ship split and the four segments began to peel back. Quill tried to withdraw from the flow as the shuttle moved toward the revealed opening. But the coral held him, tightened its anchors on the interface, twisted, and drew him, not by any force but by the sense of absolute rightness it imparted to him. This was right, this was good, this was his purpose. He knew and knowing he let himself immerse into the link—

—emerged into a flowscape

curiously abbreviated, as though large parts of it were turned back on themselves. He moved from node to node, testing the systems. Each point glowed reassuringly; but the usual extensions were absent. The passive light receptors functioned and Quill traced the input from the surrounding environment that fell on them. The radar got out, but only at a fraction of its normal bandwidth. The rest bounced back. The remainder of the sensor suite failed to penetrate the shell that seemed to envelope the shuttle's data matrix.

The comm system tested fully operative, but when Quill tried to direct a signal out to Cryshuil it simply dissipated against the bubble.

MICHAEL WHELAN



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The envelope was directional, providing gravity. He found a bright nimbus near the "top" of the flow environ that seemed to originate from outside. He shifted from system to system, instructing each one to seal itself off from any external signal. If something really wanted to invade the shuttle's flow it probably could get through eventually, but it might take long enough that he could withdraw and get the boat out manually. Not perfect security, but the best he could do for the time being.

Quill reached up and touched the nimbus.

It flared in a brief, chaotic jumble of patterns. Quill jerked back as if stung. He replayed the event, slowing it down, and saw that the fragments of pattern all followed a proportional symmetry. Code, he decided. All he had to do was interpret it and he could perhaps use it.

Quill hunted through the comm log until he found the record of the initial contact between the Intruder and the shuttle. The crimson cord had connected the two systems. He queried the comm system for an analysis and an applicable interpreter. All the interpretive work had been done by the Intruder, which possessed a much larger and more complex system, but the shuttle's comm had referred to the seti interpreter. It seized the available interchanges and began breaking down the seti code. After a short while it started to comprehend the language and could now initiate contact. Quill was dismayed at the speed of the interpreter. Perhaps this was a known language system.

When Quill touched the nimbus this time, it dilated and drew him out of the shuttle's flow, along a bright corridor, and up against another, larger nimbus.

?rhe/in****

Quill recognized that a query was being made. He twisted the encoded template from the comm until it was suddenly drawn from him.

Ident?

Quill, visitor, seeking—

System compromised/noncategorical response/query uplink?

Yes...

A small orifice opened before him. A red globe just within it pulsed. It began to move away, then waited. Quill entered the narrow track and the globe sped away from him, slowing only to allow him to catch up.

He sped by puckers, indentations, holes, and filters along the wall of the tunnel. Many of them looked damaged, as if an attempt had been made to close them up.

Abruptly the red globe vanished and Quill found himself in a blue-black enclosure. Energy pulses around the outside of it, visible as smears and brightnesses through frosted glass, the tunnel by which he had entered now gone. When he touched the wall he felt himself moved firmly back to the center of the volume.

?cON/link/specified routing/system compromised/third tier response***

Purpose?

Searching for address.

Query internal collation/fourth tier memory node/system compromised—

A loud stuttering vibrated the sphere. Quill searched for a possible exit, but he was sealed in. He was beginning to believe that the Intruder was badly damaged. He did not want to be trapped inside if it decided to destroy itself or simply gave up and collapsed. But somewhere in here was a place he had to find.

System compromised/sixth tier query intact/temporal error nonreconcilable/terminus disabled/sixth tier query shunting to real-time analog/tutorial protocol effected

A series of characters flashed across the sphere in quick succession, overlapping each other, changing and shifting so fast that even if could he have read them they would have been incomprehensible. Abruptly a line appeared from one pole to the other and the sphere began to open. It peeled back "behind" Quill and vanished, leaving him—

—standing on a broad, empty deck in an immense chamber. The darkness above concealed all detail of a ceiling, but large machine shapes hung just within the fringes of shadow. Light danced across small areas of a few of them. Quill turned slowly in place, testing his "body," knowing that he could not possibly be standing anywhere outside the shuttle, that all this had to be a simulation...but all the more remarkable for being one. The tutorial? He felt human—well, almost: He did not breathe or blink.

He knew this place. It felt familiar, like an old memory. He recognized almost nothing beyond the sensation of recognition.

A flicker caught his attention on the deck and he saw a large area disappear for a few seconds and then reappear, slightly raised. He studied his hands. They lacked the kind of minute detail his own—or anyone's—hands possessed, but the proportions were right.

He looked up, startled, at a huge shelled creature whose thick, fleshy body reared up from a base of flat pseudopodia. A row of watery blue membranes ran down either side of the main column that was capped by a tangled tuft that resembled cotton. It stood about five meters away and loomed over Quill. The shell from which it protruded looked like a series of pipes embedded one in the other, the largest on top, and darkly multicolored.

Quill suppressed an urge to back away, not even sure he could if he wanted to. He opened his mouth, wondering briefly if, without breath, he could make a sound.

"I'm Quill," he said. "I have a message."

...system compromised...error...

Quill "heard" the seti's voice like a memory, familiar and resonant, words forgotten till now. Textureless but not without inflection—it sounded frightened. The seti moved to one side with a surprisingly fluid motion for something so large and clumsy-looking.

A section of the deck vanished again, flickered back into existence briefly, then remained absent. Through the jagged hole stars shone.

"What's happening?"

...shame...cowardice...

A section of its columnar main body split off and seemed to point, indicating a path. Quill suddenly realized that it was wearing a shell, an environment suit. He wondered what it looked like inside.

Quill walked around the opening in the deck and down a long ramp. He glanced back and saw the seti following, its shell bobbing slightly.

The ramp ended at a walkway that encircled another enormous chamber. Quill stopped at the edge and looked down upon a coiled line of modules. Through their transparent casings he saw hundreds of beings, one and sometimes two per unit. Thick fog swirled around the module bases, obscuring the floor. The setis in the nearest units glistened wetly. The ridges of blue along their partially emerged trunks looked closed under a murky white membrane, and the shells themselves seemed dull and pale. Quill looked at his guide uneasily.

"Sleepers?" he asked. The seti's shell quivered and it regarded him with its eye slits. "Biological suspension?"

...yes...

"They've malfunctioned?"

...no...

"Oh. But...they look dead."

...yes...

It indicated a hatch halfway around the platform.

Quill kept glancing down among the modules and their deceased occupants. Some looked paler than others. Perhaps dead longer? Yes, he realized, the units had dumped their preservative contents according to some hierarchical protocol. He understood then that he was absorbing information from the Intruder; the interpreter took time, giving him what it decoded as it could, the same as the systems buffer in a normal interface, and that eventually he would be able to "read" the entire seti datasphere. But what he understood now frightened him.

The ship had killed them all.

There had always been stories about encounters with setis that had committed mass suicide rather than deal with a different space-faring species. Quill regarded them, like most spacers, as apocryphal. It had never made sense to him. What could be so unbearable that immolation was preferable to finding something new?

A short corridor took him into another vast space. Equipment lined the walls of the chamber. A lot of it looked vaguely familiar to him—more interpreted data—but better than half of it looked shut down or damaged. He searched anxiously. One of these objects was important. At the apex of the dome a bright nimbus glowed, like the one attached to the shuttle's datasphere.

The guide shuffled alongside Quill.

...must leave...no time...

"Why?"

...engines...

"Show me."

...no time....

It was lying. Quill still had a message to deliver, nothing would happen til then. He knew that now with absolute certainty. It did not come from the interpreter or the seti systems, but from inside him, from the frantic, unresolved place in him that had once contained the prerogative to act. Now, here, the compulsion began to make sense as more and more of the seti background resolved into clarity and found the places in him where it could connect and make sense. The medunit had deleted the message from his neural net that had kept beating against his receptors, demanding delivery, demanding something that, badly understood by his consciousness, meant ending, destruction, death. But it could not delete what his brain had absorbed, not without destroying part of him, so it had buried it where he might never find it. He did not remember, did not feel the same compulsion because the thing driving that compulsion had no way to make itself felt other than in a vague dissatisfaction with the usual answers his life had handed him. Prioritism had seemed right, the idea that he had only one true form, one thing to do—the fragments, ghosts, and weak impressions that remained of his compulsion answered to this idea and gave him a way to exist. Here, though, within this matrix, which was becoming more and more familiar, the message danced with resurrected vigor, seeing the proper ground to which it must go.

This is how religion is born, he thought, the overwhelming, unexplained experience, badly understood, finding recognition in a purpose...

He stared at the seti. What, then, was its faith, its purpose? There was time, but it was afraid.

"Show me," he repeated.

The seti trembled again, but moved off, toward a bank of—Quill did not have the word yet, but the function seemed to him similar to a general systems monitor. Most of its readouts were blank. He touched a node—

—information roiled, stormlike, trying to route itself to still-

active sites. The entire collation was fleeing and Quill pushed through the currents of scurrying data to one of the intact anchors. He grabbed onto the thick, straight bar of brightness and looked back into the maelstrom. At the corner of his vision a burst of silver seemed to chatter up and down, in and out, cutting at the streams. The interpreter. Quill watched, amazed at both its speed and at how little it managed to accomplish. There were worlds here it would never access. He held on, convinced that any instant now he would be ejected from the seti flow.

Little by little the interpreter isolated and assembled fragments from the current and, when it finished a roughly complete model, fed him the newly decoded data. It would take months or years to decrypt the entire system, but he recognized enough to make requests. Within minutes, subjective time, Quill knew he was reading parts of the system directly and understood how to get what he wanted. Some of it, anyway.

He let go of the anchor.

Instead of fighting and feeling as though he were drowning, this time the currents made sense and he moved along the most direct path to what he wanted.

A node opened for him and he—

—gazed down the length of an immense plasma tube. The walls were black with discarded particles, built up over generations of heavy use. Quill traced the lines of the magnetic field generators that funneled the improbable fire from the mixing chamber where atoms came into contact with small amounts of antimatter in a controlled inferno that superheated a cloud of water vapor. The chamber was quiet now, though still hot from its labors. Quill checked the containers of atoms and found them mostly exhausted. Even the antimatter bottle was nearly empty.

He located another line that ran from the antimatter back to another magnetic bottle—

—that was full of antimatter. Quill looked closer. Full, but not nearly large enough to fuel the plasma engines for any length of time. It made no sense. Why such a small reserve tank? And where was the reserve of normal matter? He cast about, trying to understand the arrangement he saw, and found yet another mixing chamber, fed from another set of bottles. These, too, were nearly empty, but the reaction chamber was live, powering something. Not the engines, but...

The magnetic bottle around the small antimatter cache flickered. The damn thing was weakening. Quill traced all the feeds he could find until he saw what was happening. The field was maintained by a generator powered from the secondary mixing chamber. When the atoms were gone, the bottle would fail.

Frantically, he looked for another reservoir, and saw then that the secondary chamber's fuel cells were fed from what remained of the primary cells. The entire system was designed to fail in the event that the engines ran out of fuel. In this case, failure meant demolition.

He could find no further reserves of antimatter. The seti was right, there was no time. Not much, anyway.

Something else bothered Quill. He looked over the great engines again, but...it seemed wrong. Mentally shrugging it off, he pulled out of the node—

—and let the current of data carry him along while he wrestled with the problem. Those engines, he decided, could not have accounted for the way this ship had appeared. Plasma engines like that, powerful as they might be, could not push anything at trans-light velocities. Certainly they could manage a significant fraction of *c*, perhaps over time enough for relativistic effects to begin.

Evidently not a problem for them. They used sleeper technology, hibernated through the voyage. But the ship had dumped the containers, killing the occupants, and now the whole system was about to destroy itself. It seemed desperate to Quill, irrational in the extreme. Why come all this way only to die?

He cast about for another anchor, caught hold of one, and interrogated the data stream for the navigation logs. After what seemed a long time, he found a node and reached in—

—to the charts, stacked like cubes, tall columns of locations and orbits and—

Coordinates that made no sense. Quill recognized the equivalent notations for ascension and declination, an azimuth system not too different from the one he knew, but the added strings of numbers seemed to have no corollary. That and the sheer size of the system disturbed him. Why would anyone need this much space for star charts and navigation routines?

Quill checked to see if maybe they used an analog system. No, it was different but similar to the holographic storage humans used. Which meant that a tremendous amount of data was in this. He pulled back and looked at the whole assembly. It shocked him to realize that almost a third of the ship's mass was devoted to data storage, and most of that reserved for the navigation charts.

He accessed the stacks and queried it for the journey profile. As he watched, a grid appeared through the body of a stack, circumscribing a collection of stars. Quill moved up to it and waited for a line to trace the path the ship had taken from one star to another.

A point glowed bright red. Quill assumed that to be their present location. An instant later he knew it to be the case. But the line that appeared did not traverse the grid. It moved upward, through the body of the stack, at an angle. Some distance above the first grid another one clicked into place and a green light winked on. But the track continued, describing a hyperbolic curve, up almost as much as the first distance, then back down to come to a stop on the same grid but further away from the green point. Where it stopped glowed yellow.

Somewhere back along the length of his connections he felt himself curse—

as the giant reached out again and took his face in its hands to hold him close and whisper to him, telling him the thing that lay at the center of it all, the truth and purpose of everything that it was, and Quill felt himself shrink back in terror, knowing now what lay at the heart of its sacrifice, understanding now as the giant released him and—
—he pulled out—

—released the anchor and let himself be sucked out of the flow—

—and stagger back from the node. He blinked at the seti.

"Damn," he breathed.

Quill turned, gazing at the banks upon banks of dead consoles, a raw desperation abrading his awareness. One panel shimmered with a familiar pattern. Quill approached it. The closer he came the more certain he was, that was the point, the address. He reached it and slapped his hands against it and—

—felt the command flensed from the folds of his cortex, stripped out and fed into the receptor. Distantly, it hurt, but it did not matter. It was right, correct, the purpose for his pain, the cause. The entirety of the message was a complex, long string of commands, but it possessed an essence, a single identity, and as it poured out of his hindbrain he heard its scream, a demand to end, to die, to terminate everything. He felt the entire seti machine swallow what he gave it and relax with a sense of completeness. A block fell away, a barrier to proper action, necessary action. A part of Quill now

cycled through the vast system, repeating the command, filling the gaps left by the tampering of the lone survivor. Quill thrilled to the overwhelming relief he felt through his hands—

—and stepped away, stunned. He turned to look at the seti. He understood its shame now, its fear. It had tried to live by denying a duty to which it was sworn, by trying to stop a process that was built so deeply into these vessels that nothing could really interrupt it, only delay it, and now, alone, it waited through its guilt and failure. Quill pitied it, hated it, understood it, and denied it. There was nothing he could do for it. The tutorial was finished, the lesson given. It was time to go.

Quill took a step back and—

—snapped into awareness like a fist slamming his chest. He lurched back from the console, his breath coming hard and painful.

He felt small and compressed now, cut off from the expanded scope of the flow. He had never experienced it this way before, emerging from a human-designed datasphere. It was as if his mind were shoving against the confines of its limits. He rubbed his face furiously, blinking around at the monitors.

Far above, the bay peeled open. Quill punched the engines and shot toward the opening, the gee-force crushing them all back into their couches.

The shuttle cleared the huge doors. Quill eased up on the acceleration and changed vector. He stabbed the comm.

"Chaphma! Get the fuck out of here!"

"Rouster—?"

"No talk! Move! Get the Fragment between you and the Intruder! Now! Move! Move! Move!"

The shuttle came around to the course he wanted and Quill poured on the acceleration again. He felt flat and oddly fragile beneath the weight of increasing speed. He put a view of the Intruder on one of the screens and willed it not to go up, wait, give them time.

With a pleasant shock he realized how much he wanted to live. He had not quite missed that feeling for the past four years, but now that it was back he welcomed it as a revelation. The urge to sacrifice himself that had underlain everything he had done since the *Talleyrand* was gone. The last convulsive desire, inside the Intruder's system, had faded unnoticed.

But the trip took more than three hours and he kept waiting for the hammerblow from behind that would kill him. Until he crossed the edge of the Fragment he did not believe he would make it.

Everyone but Leshian and Risher gathered in the mission module to watch after *Cryshuil* began distancing itself from the Fragment.

The remotes survived for several seconds. When the Intruder went, Persal's constant stream of invective cut off sharply at the sight of the white-hot fireball that enveloped the big ship, then began its rapid expansion outward. The shockwave tossed the remotes, taxing their stabilizers, for a full minute before the cloud of searing plasma washed over them and ended their signals.

On the other screens the Fragment became visible as an immense shape backlit by growing brilliance.

A pinprick of light appeared in one corner of the Fragment where a chunk of it broke loose under the shock.

Persal stopped watching after a time. He sat down and propped his head against his left hand, thumb and forefinger pressed to his eyes.

When he looked up again, his eyes were red and moist.

"The Fragment is moving," Shell reported. "Away from the dwarf...roughly point six kilometers per second...it might stabilize again, I'd have to run the math..."

Persal shrugged. "The whole surface is probably compressed. Ruined." He looked up at Quill. "Just what the hell were you doing in there?"

"Ask Co Mysqual," Quill said.

"This is *my* commission!" Persal snapped.

Shell frowned at him, but said nothing. Quill cleared his throat, wanting to defend himself, but he could not respond. He folded his arms over his chest and looked at Magda.

"Our contract," she said, "doesn't specify a hierarchy. One of your party makes a request, we honor it. You did approve rouser's shutting them out—"

"I didn't approve him destroying my project!"

"We did find out a lot about the Intruder, Co Persal," Quill said.

"Who cares?" Persal stood and limped in the direction of his cabin.

"All the prep work and the expense. My remotes are gone, those were all I had. After that explosion, who knows if we'll ever get a decent estimate of its age. Wasted time." He stopped at the hatch and lowered his head. "I apologize. I—" He shook his head and left the module.

Magda turned to Quill. "Rouser—"

"It was going to go anyway. If we hadn't gone in we wouldn't have known. Co Persal would be dead now. So would Chaphma."

She pursed her lips speculatively, then nodded. "All right. He'll get over it."

The Menkan's cabin reminded

him of Dobbs's engineering module. The walls were covered with objects that had the look of icons, though none Quill recognized. None except the diamond shape of the Intruder. It hung, a polished blue-gray plaque, above a small platform illuminated from above by a light that resembled the nimbus. It looked like an altar to Quill, a small shrine, a dedicatory.

Mysqual stood off to one side of the platform, all its limbs neatly tucked around its body in a complex braided arrangement. Quill coughed at the sweet odor that hung in the air.

"Explain?" Mysqual asked.

"What do you want to know?"

"Who are they?"

"You don't know?"

"We have theories."

Quill shrugged. "Just travelers, like us. Their ship—they didn't have TEG drive, no faster-than-light technology. They used a plasma stream. Matter-antimatter to fuel the reaction. I'd guess they accelerated constantly, might even have managed 25, 30 percent of *c*. But that's not fast enough. They hibernated during a journey, then—when they arrived at their destination—they jumped back in time."

"Time?"

"That's right. They could do that. They'd jump back in time to a point shortly after they'd originally left, then wake up. They could refuel then. Sometimes they made a mistake."

Some of Mysqual's limbs shifted, giving the impression of agitation. "Mistake?"

"Something would go wrong and they'd come back too far. They wouldn't have enough fuel for a return journey."

"Mistake?"

"The only alternative they had was self-destruction. I mean, they don't want to risk changing history." He looked at Sapur. "What I must have received from that first one, aboard the *Talleyrand*, was the sig-

nal to start the destruct sequence. It gave it to me." He shook his head. "Then it went back in time farther. That's what saved us. They weren't going to make two mistakes." Quill glanced at the icons on Mysqual's walls. "It was like a religion to them."

"Mistake?"

Quill hesitated and looked at Sapur. The Rahalen regarded Mysqual impassively, ignoring Quill.

"Mistake?" Mysqual repeated.

"Yes—"

Several limbs whipped out with startling speed and Quill stepped back reflexively.

"Liar," Mysqual said and whirled around. It trundled off into the shadows.

Sapur took Quill's shoulder and guided him to the exit.

"Mysqual doesn't believe me?"

"Mysqual cannot."

"Why?"

Sapur stopped. The azure eyes looked down at Quill. "Do you really need an explanation?"

"You said you knew what the Intruder was."

"Yes."

"You've never told Mysqual?"

"No."

"And you won't tell Persal what the Fragment is?"

"No." The Rahalen cocked its head to one side. "Why?"

"To let them know the truth."

Sapur nodded. "The truth. Ah, well. Do you really think they want the truth? Mysqual believes the Intruders—Menkans call them *Kwoarza*—to be divine, related in some way to their own creation, to their own emergence as a civilization. It was Mysqual's desire to become a part of that divinity. The idea that divine beings could make a mistake...you yourselves have some acquaintance with the unacceptability of such thoughts. And suicide? By divine creatures? An even greater sacrilege perhaps."

Quill thought about that for a moment. "I don't know, I think it's pretty impressive to sacrifice yourself for something you think is right."

"We would not agree. Sacrifice is only a momentary thing, soon overwhelmed by subsequent events." Sapur seemed to shrug. "I thank you, Co Quill. Mysqual will get over the disappointment and perhaps learn from what you've said."

"You insisted *Cryshuil* take me on. You arranged all this to—to do what?"

"To enable seekers to look. Everyone does something. This is what we do."

"Do the Menkans know how much you're not telling them?"

"Who can say what anyone knows about anything?" Sapur tilted its head. "History is only a matter of recording. The record is not bound by time, only the observer."

Go back to the beginning to find where responsibility lies, Quill thought. *What if you go past your beginning, though?*

Quill left, dissatisfied.

Magda gave him Dobbs's position for the voyage home. He knew he should be pleased, that he had regained what he had wanted, what he had possessed, before his life had been remade for the sake of a message. But it left him unimpressed. The core was gone, emptied out of him. He settled down to do his job and hoped it would give him enough. He hung the pouch with his prayerbook on the wall among the other icons to sacrifice.

Truth is in the seeking. What comes at the end is a lifeless thing and a new path.

Rahalen Proverb □

If you think that the singles life is difficult now, wait until genetic engineering

marla and the eeler

MARLA, MY BOSS'S SECRETARY at the virtual slipper factory, never could stand eelers. Said they were creepy, how the Navy tried to use them as assassins against the goat clones in the Easter Island wars. I said, you can't hold that against them. Artificial people don't ask to get born, you know. Just like she was naturally skinny, I mean she could eat anything—but let's get back to the eelers.

I thought it would be funny to set her up, you know, arrange a blind date. I had this friend, he was only down here a few years, but he spoke pretty good English, and knew all the modern slang. You wouldn't know to talk to him he was anything but natural born. His mother wasn't an eeler—I know 50 percent of them get born that way—but she was hard up on Mars and when the Navy came around suggesting that they'd pay 50 clams just for the privilege, and not interfere with the child at all except maybe to make sure he got a proper education...you get the idea.

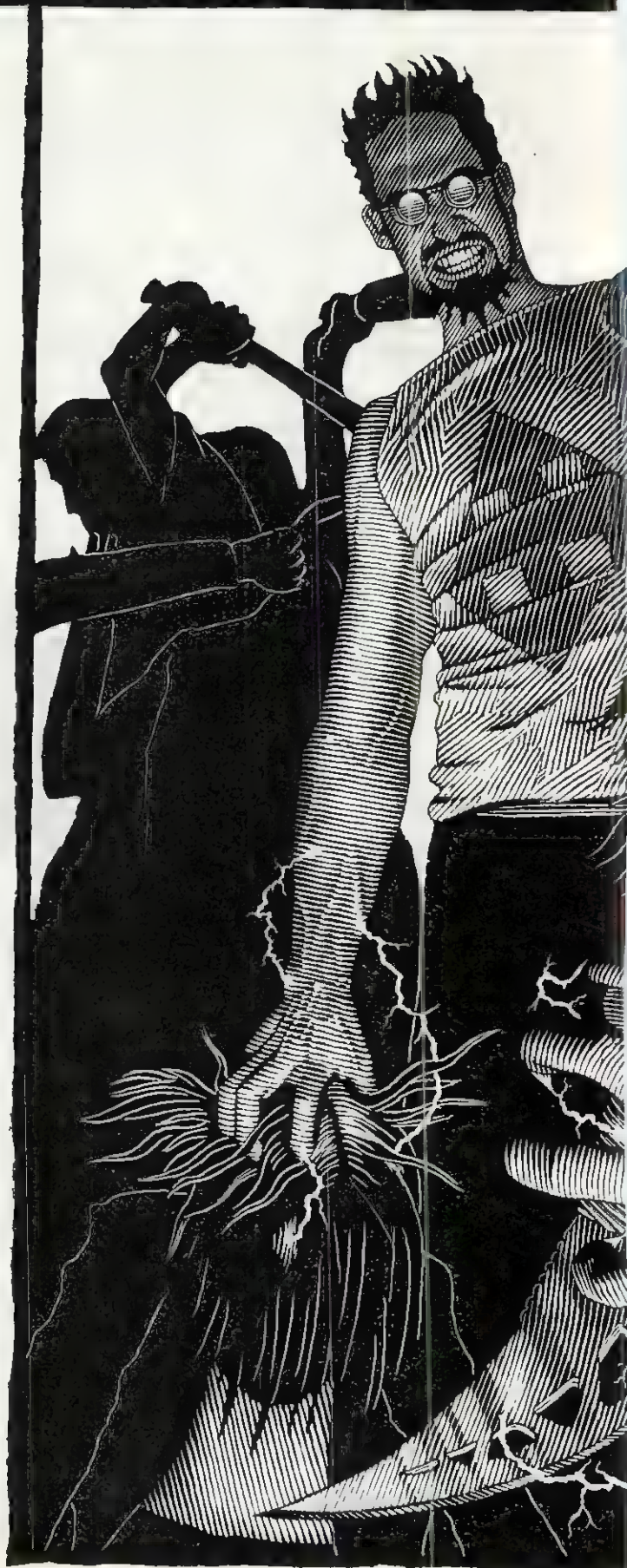
Marla, she loved the feelies. I guess that's maybe why she got the job at the virtual slipper factory, it was the closest she could get to making feelies. So we told her we knew this bloke who had written some dialogue for a feelie with Obi Gregory in it, and she just creamed.

You understand, my friend the eeler—Juan-Pedro was his name, Juan-Pedro Gomez y Lorca—wasn't in the feelies, hadn't written for the feelies. Nearest he came to that is he had a job as security guard at Paramount Stardust. Or did, until they found out about his special abilities. Real quick, they figured they could get sued something precious if he shocked some idiot trying to sneak into the lot to grab a feel or even get into a scenario. They say the eelers can control the voltage when they taze somebody, but still, they could have an unlawful death suit. You get the picture.

I decided it would be even funnier if I didn't let on to Juan-Pedro that Marla had this little expectation of him.

BY MARY A. TURZILLO

Illustration by Patrick Arrasmith



inally takes hold—then the dating scene will be positively shocking.



So she met Juan-Pedro and things clicked, as I kind of expected they would, because Marla is a horny little bitch, and Juan-Pedro—well—

I was twisted into a real hoot. I didn't dare say a word to anybody at work, you understand. Marla would be sure to find out what I'd done and just know it was deliberate. But I just laughed and laughed. Not that she didn't have her suspicions. One time she asked me if I'd noticed Juan-Pedro had these little flaps of skin on his forearms, under the skin, could they be needle tracks? Only very clean and natural looking. I told her she was imagining things. I said I used to teach Juan-Pedro touch-typing, and I never noticed any flaps, just some scars he'd got from a virtual glove that was too tight, when he was learning to be an ostrich pilot.

She'd never seen a real eeler up close. Just hated them on general principles. So she swallowed my story.

Why'd she get so involved with him?

I figured she was getting some of that joy juice the girls say eelers hand out. It may be just one of those stereotypes, but who knows?

I sure wasn't going to ask Juan-Pedro.

Then it happened.

I told you Marla had some pretty peculiar tastes. Well, it turns out she shared one of them with Juan-Pedro. Maybe that was the attraction, I don't know.

They went to a vampire convention together. Oh, neither of them aspired to suck any blood, none of that foolishness. The situation with the vampires was tense because there had been political trouble. And these were bad vampires, though it never got in the papers. The NYPD knew damn well it was more than playing with this particular group of blood-thugs. A former vampire in the upper East End had been cut up, and while she said the perps had worn masks, the cops said they were pretty sure she

was lying to protect her old chums. She wouldn't have called the cops, you understand, only she was underage and her mom was just horrified at what they did to her.

Anyway, when Marla and Juan-Pedro went in the bar of the hotel where the vampires were partying after their regular convention, Marla was all hypered up. I don't know, maybe she got a little high, maybe not. You understand, this was a goth bar. It used to be just an ordinary hotel bar. But it was taken over by the vampires, and they can get pretty rough, from what I understand.

Marla, she got stroking the arm of one of the prettier male vampires, and he was coming on to her.

I got all this from Juan-Pedro after the brouhaha, see. He kept his cool, because eelers have to learn cool from birth. He just kept telling Marla, "Come on, girl, we have to leave. Last call at the funny farm."

But Marla, she was crazy. She had been drinking one of those chocolate concoctions, I think they call them Human Sacrifices, made with cocoa powder, ground red pepper, a shot of vodka, a shot of Kalhua, and a Sudafed. I mean, this is a drink meant to hop you up like Frankenstein when the electricity hit him. They say it was inspired by a brew the Aztecs used to prep priests—and the heart donors, too.

So she was sucking up to this vampire, and he was about ready to eat her up, no pun intended, and Juan-Pedro was getting impatient.

The hunk vampire's girlfriend enters the picture and pulls a knife on Marla. Ready to cut her up good, and maybe drag her out in the alley for a little organic-style Bloody Mary.

Things got ugly fast. The male vampire decided he had to show he was a real blood-stud, so he goes after Juan-Pedro.

Juan-Pedro had no choice. He tazed both of them. They collapsed on the floor and all their buddies were too stunned (no

Continued on page 94

The Church of the Ultimate Sacrifice wanted Hans Cramer to save their sacred planet.
The only thing Hans Cramer wanted to save was Francesca.

DARK CALVARY

BY ERIC BROWN

Illustration By John Berkey

He buried Francesca in the rich jungle soil of Tartarus Major while the sky pulsed with the photon hemorrhage of the supernova and the Abbot of the Church of the Ultimate Sacrifice knelt and chanted prayer.

And he thought that was the end of the affair.

Hans Cramer met Francesca when she was 18, two decades his junior but wise beyond her years, and already a second-class helio-meteorologist aboard one of the Fleet's finest nova observation vessels. Cramer was employed as an itinerant lecturer, teaching philosophy and theology to the reluctant crews of the various ships of the Zakynthos Line. His posting to the observation sailship *Dawn Light* was just another move, but one that changed his life.

Francesca was a regular at his ram-

bling lectures in the vast auditorium of the city-sized sailship. She was distinguished by her striking Venezuelan face and jet-black mass of hair—an affectation in space, where so many crew went partly shorn or bald. What attracted him initially was not so much her physical aspect as her youth, and that she attended every one of his lectures. She was that rarity among spacers: a student who wanted to learn. After years of having his talks received with boredom, or at best polite apathy, Cramer found her attentiveness exhilarating. It was natural that he should single her out for special tuition. He gave her one-to-one lessons, and she responded. He prided himself on the fact that she excelled, absorbed everything he had to offer, and was still hungry for more.

Inevitably, perhaps, they transcended the teacher-pupil relationship and became lovers. It was a gradual



process, but one which culminated in an event that informed them both that their feelings for each other were reciprocated. They had been discussing the physics of spatial dimensions congruent to singularities, and the conversation continued well beyond the time Cramer usually allotted for her tuition. The talk turned general, and then personal. There was a period of silence, and Cramer looked into the depths of her Indian eyes—and he was suddenly aware of his desire, affection, and overwhelming need to be responsible for Francesca.

For the next year Cramer lectured aboard the *Dawn Light* as it sailed from star to unstable star, and their love deepened into a thorough understanding of each other. She told Cramer that which she had never told anyone before: how, at the age of 10, she had lost her father. He had been a scientist, working on the planet of a sun due to go nova, when the sun blew before its time and killed him and his scientific team ... this, Cramer thought, helped to explain the choice of her profession.

Cramer became for Francesca a combination of lover-teacher-protector, as well as a friend and confidant ... And for him Francesca was the first person in his life to remind him that he was not, contrary to nearly 40 years of assumptions otherwise, the fulcrum of the universe. Her naivety, her vitality and honesty, her willingness to learn, her trust in others—he was in awe of all these things. Sometimes he wanted to protect her from herself when others might take advantage, but at the same time he learned from her that openness and trust can bring their own rewards: contact with one's fellows, even friendships, which for long enough he had shunned. Her youth and enthusiasm were a foil to Cramer's age and cynicism, and though at times he found it exhausting, more often than not he was swept along heedless by the tide of her passion.

Francesca had her dark side, though.

Six months after they became lovers, she slipped into a sullen, uncommunicative depression. Often he found her in tears, his entreaties ignored. He assumed that the chemical magic that had attracted her to him had soured, that their time together had run its course.

Then, one rest period, Cramer found her in a personal nacelle that obtruded through the skin of the ship and afforded a magnificent view of the blazing variable below. Francesca had sought privacy in which to brood. He lowered himself in beside her and waited.

After a period of silence, she asked in a whisper, "What do you believe, Hans?"

Cramer had never spoken to her about his beliefs, or lack of—perhaps fearing that his apathy might frighten her away. "I was once a nihilist," he said, "but now I believe in nothing."

She slapped his face. "Be serious!"

He was serious. "Nothing," he said.

She was silent, a small frown of puzzlement denting her forehead. At last she murmured, "I need belief. I need to believe in something ... something more than all this." She made a spread-fingered gesture to indicate everything, all existence. "Life is so meaningless, if this is all there is to it—life. There must be something more!"

He stroked a strand of hair from her Indian eyes.

She looked at him. "Don't you fear death? Don't you wake up panicking in the early hours, thinking, 'One day I'll be dead for all eternity'?"

He could not help but smile. "At one time I did," he said. "But no more." He told her that it was as if his subconscious had become injured to the fact of his mortality, was no longer daunted by the inevitability of his death.

Francesca was crying. "I hate being alive," she sobbed, "if all it will end in is death."

Cramer held her, soothed her with comforting noises, secretly relieved that he knew the reason for her depression. He told himself that it was nothing more than a stage through which everyone must pass—but, perhaps, he should have seen in her terror the

seeds of a consuming obsession.

Six months later Cramer was posted to another ship—there was nothing he could do to avoid the transfer—and he saw Francesca only once every three months or so, when their dirtside leaves coincided. He had feared that the separation might have worked to dampen Francesca's ardor, but the reverse was true. Their hurried, stolen weeks together were the happiest times of their lives.

And then, three years after their first meeting, Francesca was promoted, transferred to a ship bound for the Rim, to study the effects of an imminent supernova on the world of Tartarus Major.

Cramer was on Earth, on long-service leave from the Fleet and teaching part time at the University of Rio. Francesca was due back in a week, when her boat would dock at the Santiago shipyards for refurbishment. Cramer had a trekking holiday planned in the Andes, followed by two weeks in Acapulco, before they said goodbye again and her ship whisked her off to some far, unstable star.

He could recall precisely where he was, what he was doing—even trivial things like what he was wearing at the time, and what mood he was in—when he heard about the crash-landing: in a café on the Rio seafront, drinking coffee and reading *El Globe*, wearing the kaftan Francesca had brought back from the emirate colony of Al Haq, and feeling contentment at the thought of her imminent return. The wall-screen was relaying news to the café's oblivious, chattering clientele. He took notice only when it was announced that a Fleet observation vessel had crash-landed on the Rim world of Tartarus Major. "The *Pride of Valencia* went down two days ago," said the reporter. "Casualty figures are not yet known. Other news..."

His soul released its pent up breath; relief flooded him. For perhaps five seconds Cramer existed in a glorious state of reprieve, because he knew, didn't he, that Francesca was aboard the observation vessel *Dawn Light*? Then, crashing through his consciousness like a great wave came the awareness that she had left the *Dawn Light* months ago, had been promoted to the *Pride of Valencia*.

Cramer returned to his apartment, shock lending him a strange sense of calm in which he felt removed from the reality of his surroundings. He contacted the Fleet headquarters in Geneva, but was told that no details of the incident would be forthcoming until accident investigators had reported from Tartarus Major. Unable to bear the wait, the feeling of redundancy, he knew that the only course of action was make his way independently to Tartarus. He booked passage on a sailship leaving Earth the following day, and spent the duration of the voyage under blissful sedation.

He had no idea what to expect on landing, but it was not the decrepit, medieval city of Baudelaire. It seemed to him that he had stepped back in time. Not only were the architecture and atmosphere of the place archaic, but the bureaucracy and services were likewise mired in the past. The prevailing ethos of the government departments he petitioned seemed to be that the loss of any sailship—and minor officials seemed unsure as to whether a sailship had been lost on Tartarus Major—was not the responsibility of their department, and Cramer was advised to see so-and-so at such-and-such a bureau. To add to the confusion, the entire population of the planet seemed to be packed into the capital city, eager to catch a boat off-planet before the supernova blew. Eventually, and with scant regard for his feelings, he was advised to check at the city morgue. Beside himself, he battled through the bustling streets until he came upon the relevant building. The chambers and corridors of the morgue proved to be as crowded as the streets outside, though with the stiffened, shrouded figures of the dead. Here, tearful and in obvious distress, he had his first stroke of luck. He happened upon a harassed Fleet official checking charred remains against the crew list of the *Pride of Valencia*.

Cramer explained his predicament, and the official took sympathy and went through the names of the dead for that of Francesca.

She was not, apparently, in the morgue. All the bodies had been recovered from the site of the crash. According to the official, Cramer was in luck: He was advised to try the infirmary, where the 12 surviving crew members were receiving treatment.

Given hope, he was filled with fear, now, at the thought of Francesca's having survived—or rather he feared the state in which she might have survived. Would he find Francesca reduced to a brain-dead wreck, a hopelessly injured cripple? He considered only the worst-case scenario as he made his way to the infirmary. He explained his situation to a doctor who escorted him to the ward where the survivors lay. As the medic checked the records, Cramer strode down the line of beds—not rejuvenation pods, in this backward hole, but beds!—fearful lest he should come upon Francesca, yet petrified that he should not.

She was not on the ward.

The doctor joined Cramer, carrying the crew list of the *Pride of Valencia*. There was one name outstanding, accounted for neither in the morgue nor in the hospital: Francesca Maria Rodriguez.

Cramer was in turmoil. "Then where the hell is she?"

The doctor placed a soothing hand on his shoulder. "Two of the injured were found in the jungle by an order of monks who took them in and treated their wounds. One male crew member died—the other, Rodriguez, is still undergoing treatment."

"Is she badly injured?"

"I'm sorry. I have no records..." He paused. "You might try the Church of the Ultimate Sacrifice, just along the street. They should be able to help you."

Cramer thanked him and, filled with a mixture of despair and hope that left him mentally exhausted, he almost ran from the infirmary. He found the church without difficulty: in a street of mean timber buildings it was the only stone-built edifice, a towering cathedral along classical lines.

He hurried inside. A cowed figure riding an invalid carriage barred his way. Desperately Cramer explained himself. The disabled cleric told him to wait and propelled his carriage up the aisle. While he was gone, Cramer gazed about the sumptuous interior. He noticed the strange, scorpion-like statue above the altar, flanked by a human figure bound to a cross—its arms and legs removed so that it resembled the remains of some ancient statue. He could not help but wonder what perverted cult he had stumbled upon.

The monk returned and gestured that Cramer should follow him. He led the way to a small study behind the altar. "The Abbot," he murmured as Cramer passed inside.

Behind a large desk was an imposing figure garbed in a black habit, his face concealed by a deep cowl.

Nervously, Cramer sat down. Prompted by the Abbot's silence, he babbled his story.

Halfway through, he paused and peered into the shadow of the Abbot's hood. The holy man seemed to have his eyes closed. Cramer noticed the dried, discolored orbs tied to his right wrist, but failed to make the connection.

He continued with what the doctor had told him about Francesca. When he had finished, the Abbot remained silent for some time. He placed his fingertips together in a miniature facsimile of the spire that surmounted the cathedral. He seemed to be contemplating.

He said at last, his voice a rasp, "Are you a believer, Mr. Cramer?"

"In your religion?" Cramer shifted uncomfortably.

"In any."

"I... I have my own beliefs."

"That sounds to me like another way of admitting you're an atheist."

"Does it matter?" he asked. He contained his anger. The Abbot was, after all, his only link with Francesca.

The holy man seemed to take an age before he next spoke. "I can help you, Mr. Cramer. Francesca is in the jungle."

"How badly..." he began, the words catching in his throat.

"Do not worry yourself unduly. She will live."

Cramer sat back in his seat, relief washing over him. He imagined Francesca recuperating in some remote jungle hospital.

"When can I see her?"

"Tomorrow I return to the jungle to resume my pilgrimage. If you wish, you may accompany me."

Cramer thanked him, relieved that at last his search was almost over.

"I leave at first light," said the Abbot. "You will meet me here." And he gestured—parting his spired hands—to indicate that the audience was over.

That night Cramer found expensive lodging in a crowded boarding house. In the morning the sun rose huge and brooding over the parched city, though the sky had been lighted all night long with the primary's technicolor fulminations. He had slept badly, apprehensive as to the state in which he might find Francesca. At dawn he returned to the cathedral and met the Abbot, and they hurried through narrow alleyways to a jetty and a barge painted in the sable and scarlet colors of the Church.

The native crew of two cast off the moorings, and the barge slipped sideways into midstream before the engines caught. Cramer sat on the foredeck, in the shade of a canvas awning, and shared a glass of thick red wine with the Abbot. The holy man threw back his cowl, and Cramer could not help but stare. The Abbot's ears and nose had been removed, leaving only dark holes and scabrous scar tissue. His eyelids, stitched shut over hollow sockets, were curiously flattened, like miniature drumheads. He kept his eyeballs, dried and shrunken, on a thong of optic nerves around his wrist.

The barge proceeded upriver, against a tide of smaller craft streaming in the opposite direction. The Abbot cocked his head toward their puttering engines. "Some believed the things that were spoken," he quoted, "and some did not. Once, sir, all Tartarus believed. Now the faith is defended by a devout minority."

Cramer murmured something noncommittal in reply. He was not interested in the Abbot's belief system and its macabre extremes. For 15 years he had taught students rudiments of the various major faiths. Now religion, every religion, sickened him. In his opinion superstitious belief systems were just one more political tool that man used to subjugate, terrorize, and enslave his fellow man.

He finished his wine, excused himself, and retreated to his cabin. He drew the shutters against the light and, despite the heat, enjoyed the sleep he had been denied the night before.

He awoke hours later, much refreshed, hardly able to believe after the trials of the past two days that Francesca would soon be in his arms. He climbed to the deck. The sun was directly overhead—he must have slept for five or six hours. The barge was pulling into a jetty. A tumbledown collection of timber buildings lined the riverbank. The Abbot appeared at Cramer's side. "Chardon's Landing," he said. "From here we walk. It is 30 kilometers to the plateau."

With scarcely a delay they set off, Cramer marvelling at the blind man's sure tread as he navigated his way through the jungle. At first the trek was not arduous. The way had been cleared, and they fol-

lowed a well-defined path through the undergrowth. Only later, as they put 20 kilometers behind them, and the path began to climb, did Cramer begin to feel the strain. They slowed and halted often to swallow water from leather canteens.

They continued through the long, sultry hours of afternoon; at last, when Cramer thought he could continue no more, they came to a clearing. Before them the plateau fell away in a sheer drop, affording an open panorama of treetops stretching all the way to the northern horizon beneath a violent, actinic sky.

Only then did Cramer notice the tent, to one side of the clearing.

He turned to the Abbot. "Where are we?"

The holy man gestured. "Francesca's tent," was his only reply.

"But this can't be the mission..." Cramer began.

He heard a sound from across the clearing, and turned quickly. He stared in dread as Francesca drew aside the tent flap and stepped out. His heart began a labored pounding. She stood, tiny and trim in her radiation silvers. He searched her for any sign of injury—but she seemed whole and perfect, as he had dreamed of her all along. She stared at him, appearing uncertain at his presence. A smile came hesitantly to her lips.

He crossed the clearing and hugged her to his chest.

She pulled away, shaking her head. "I meant to contact you. It's just..." Cramer had expected tears; instead, she was almost matter-of-fact.

"Francesca... What's happening? The Abbot—" He nodded toward the holy man, who was busying himself with a second tent across the clearing. "He said that you were injured, in the hospital—"

She looked pained. "Come. We have a lot to talk about." She took his hand and drew him into the tent.

They sat facing each other. He scanned her for injuries, but saw no bandages, compresses, or scabs of synthetic flesh.

She read his gaze, and smiled. "Cuts and bruises, nothing serious."

Cramer felt a constriction in his throat. "You were lucky."

She lowered her head, looked at him through her lashes. "You don't know how lucky," she murmured.

A silence developed, and he wished at that moment that silence was all that separated them; but they seemed divided by more than just the inability to communicate meaningfully.

Then he saw the book beside her inflatable pillow. Embossed in scarlet upon its black cover was the symbol of a scorpion beside a dismembered human figure.

"Francesca..." he pleaded. "What's happening?"

She did not meet his gaze. "What do you mean?"

He indicated the holy book.

It was some time before she could bring herself to respond. At last she looked up, her eyes wide, staring, as if still in shock from the trauma of the crash-landing.

"After the accident," she began, "I lay in the wreckage, surrounded by the others... my friends and colleagues. They were dead..." She paused, gathered herself. "I couldn't move. I saw a figure, the Abbot, and then other robed monks moving among the crew, giving blessings, first aid where they could. Eventually the Abbot found me. They loaded me onto a stretcher, knocked me out. The next thing I remember, I was in the mission hospital at Chardon's Landing."

"And the Abbot did all this without eyes—?"

"He was sighted then," Francesca said. "Only later did he return to Baudelaire to petition for *penance physique*." She paused, continued, "Before that, while I recuperated, he told me about his faith, his quest."

Cramer echoed that last word, sickened by something in her tone.

"The Abbot is searching for the lost temple of the Slarque," Francesca went on, "the race that lived on Tartarus before humankind. This temple is of special significance to his religion."

Something turned in his stomach. He gestured toward the book. "Do you believe that?" he said.

She stared at him with her green and vital eyes. "I'm intrigued by the extinct aliens," she replied. "I was always interested in xenarchaeology. I want to help the Abbot find the temple."

He felt betrayed. "You act as his eyes?"

She nodded, then reached out and took his hand. "I love you, Hans.

I always have and always will. This... this is something I must experience. Please, don't obstruct me."

The Abbot called that a meal was prepared.

The sun was dipping below the horizon, presaging the nightly show of tattered flames and flares like shredded banners. They sat in the shade of the jungle—Cramer relieved when Francesca chose to sit next to him—and ate from a platter of meat, cheese, and bread. He recalled her words, her avowal of love, but they did nothing to banish his jealousy.

The Abbot poured wine and spoke of his religion, his belief that only through physical mortification would his God be appeased and the sun cease its swelling. Cramer listened with mounting incredulity. From time to time he glanced at Francesca. The girl he knew of old would have piped up with some pithy remark along the lines that the holy man's fellow believers had been sawing bits off themselves for centuries, and *still* the sun was unstable. But she said nothing. She seemed hypnotized by the Abbot's words.

Cramer was drunk with the wine, or he would have held his tongue. "A lot your mortification has achieved so far," he slurred, indicating the burning heavens.

"Once we locate the temple of the Slarque," said the Abbot, "our efforts will be rewarded. Be glad and rejoice, for the Lord will do great things." According to his holy book, he said, strange feats and miracles were to be expected in the alien ruins—but by this time Cramer had heard enough, and concentrated on his drinking.

He shared Francesca's tent that night. He sat cross-legged, a bottle of wine half-full in his lap. Francesca lay on her back, staring up at the sloping fabric.

He processed his thoughts and carefully ordered his words. "How... how can you be sure that you'll find the temple before the sun—?"

"The Abbot and his minions have searched most of the jungle—there is only this sector to go. We will find the shrine."

"You sound in little doubt."

She turned her head and stared at him. "I am in no doubt," she said.

He determined, then, that he would not let her go. He would restrain her somehow, drag her back to Baudelaire and then to Earth.

"When do you set out on this... this expedition?" he asked.

"Tomorrow, maybe the day after." There was defiance in her tone.

"Then you'll return...?" He could not bring himself to say, "to me?" Instead he said, "You'll rejoin the Fleet?"

She glanced at him, seemed to be searching for the words with which to explain herself. "Hans... I joined the Fleet believing that through science we might do something to stabilize these novae. Over the years, I've come to realize that nothing can be done." She frowned. "I can't go back, can't rejoin the Fleet." She hesitated, seemed to want to go on, but instead just shook her head in frustration.

She turned her back on him and slept.

Her words echoing in his head, Cramer drank himself unconscious.

He was awoken by a sound, perhaps hours later. He oriented himself and reached out for Francesca, but she was gone. He gathered his wits, peered from the tent. Across the clearing he made out Francesca's short figure next to the tall form of the Abbot. They were shouldering their packs, their movements careful so as not to wake him. Cramer felt the smouldering pain of betrayal in his gut. From his pack he drew his laser and slipped from the tent. As he moved around the clearing, keeping to the shadows, he was formulating a plan. He would stun both Francesca and the Abbot, then flee with her back to the port and take the first ship home. The girl was not in her right mind, could not be held responsible for her actions.

Francesca saw him coming. She stared at him, wide-eyed.

Dry of throat, Cramer said, "You were leaving me!"

"Do not try to stop us," the Abbot warned.

Francesca cried, "I must go! If you love me, if you trust me, then you'll let me go!"

"What have you done to her!" he yelled at the Abbot.

"You cannot stop us," the holy fool said. "The way of the pious will not be impeded by those of scant faith!"

Cramer raised his laser, clicked off the safety catch.

Francesca was shaking her head. "No..."

His vision swam. A combination of the heat, the drink, the emotional consequences of what was happening conspired to addle his wits.

Francesca made to turn and go.

He reached out, caught her arm. The sudden feel of her, the hot flesh above her elbow, reminded Cramer of what he was losing. He pulled her to him. "Francesca..."

Her eyes communicated an anger close to hatred. She struggled. She was small, but the determination with which she fought was testament to her desire to be free. He was incensed. He roared like a maniac and dragged her across the clearing toward the tent. She screamed and broke free.

Then Cramer raised his laser and fired, hitting her in the chest and knocking her off her feet, the large-eyed expression of disbelief at what he'd done still on her face as she hit the ground.

The Abbot was on his knees beside her, his fingers fumbling for her pulse. He stared blindly in Cramer's direction. "You've killed her! My God, you've killed her!"

"No..." He collapsed and held the loose bundle of Francesca in his arms. There was no movement, no heartbeat. Her head lolled. He cried into her hair that he had not meant to...

The Abbot began a doleful prayer for Cramer's soul. Cramer wanted to hate him then, revile the holy man for infecting Francesca with his insane belief, but in his grief and guilt he could only weep and beg forgiveness.

At the Abbot's suggestion Cramer buried Francesca in the rank jungle soil, while the night sky pulsed and flared with all the colors of Hell.

When it was done, and they stood above the fresh mound of earth, Cramer asked, "And you?"

"I will continue on my quest."

"Without eyes?"

"We walk by faith, not by sight," the Abbot said. "If God wishes me to find the shrine, that is his will."

Cramer remained kneeling by the grave for hours, not quite sane. As the sun rose he set off on the long trek south, the Abbot's dolorous chant following him into the jungle. He caught one of the many ferries bound for Baudelaire, and the following day bought passage aboard a slowboat to Earth.

He lost himself in Venezuela's vast interior, relived his time with Francesca, wallowed in grief and guilt, and cursed himself for her death.

Then, just short of four months later, the Abbot came to Earth with news from Tartarus Major.

Cramer was sitting on the porch of his jungle retreat, the abandoned timber villa of some long-dead oil prospector. It was not yet noon and already his senses were numbed with alcohol. The encroaching jungle, the variation of greens, and the odd splash of color from bird or flower reminded him of Tartarus—though the sky, what little of it could be seen through the treetops, was innocent of the baleful eye of the supernova.

The rattle of loose boards sounded through the humid air. His first visitor in four months approached along the walkway from the riverbank.

He sat up, fearful of trouble. He checked the pistol beneath the cushion at his side.

The walkway rose from the river in an erratic series of zigzags, and only when the caller negotiated the final turn could Cramer make him out. With his long sable habit and peaked hood he looked the very image of Death itself.

The boards were loose and treacherous. The Abbot had to tread with care, but not once did he reach for the siderails—and only when he arrived at the verandah did Cramer realize why. The Abbot had had his arms removed since their last encounter.

To each his own mortification, Cramer thought. He hoisted his bottle in greeting.

"What the hell brings you here?" he asked. "You've finally abandoned your damn-fool quest?"

The holy man sat cross-legged before Cramer, a feat of some achievement considering the absence of his arms. He tipped his head back, and his cowl slipped from his bald pate to reveal a face ravaged by the depredations of his piety.

Cramer noted that his dried eyeballs were now fastened about his left ankle, bolas-like.

"In two days I return to Tartarus," he said in his high, rasping voice. His stitched-shut eye sockets faced Cramer's approximate direction. "My quest is almost over."

Cramer raised his drink. "You don't know how pleased I am," he sneered. "But I thought no one knew the whereabouts of your precious shrine?"

"Once, that was true," the Abbot said, unperturbed by Cramer's rancor. "Explorers claimed they'd stumbled upon the alien temple, and then just as conveniently stumbled away again, unable to recall its precise location. But then two weeks ago a miracle occurred."

Cramer took a long pull from the bottle and offered his guest a shot. The Abbot refused.

"There is a pouch on a cord around my waist," he said. "Take it. Retrieve the items within."

Cramer made out the small leather pouch, its neck puckered by a drawstring. He could not reach the Abbot from his seat. He was forced to kneel, coming into contact with the holy man's peculiar body odor—part the stench of septic flesh, part the chemical reek of the analgesics that seeped from his every pore.

He opened the pouch and reached inside.

Three spherical objects met his fingertips, and he knew immediately what they were. One by one he withdrew the image apples. He did not immediately look into their depths. It was as if some precognition granted him the knowledge of what he was about to see. Only after long seconds did he raise the first apple to his eyes.

He gave an involuntary sob.

Image apples were not a fruit at all, but the exudations of an amber-like substance, clear as dew, from tropical palms native to Tartarus. Through a bizarre and unique process, the apples imprinted within themselves, at a certain stage in their growth, the image of their surroundings.

Bracing himself, Cramer looked into the first apple again, then the second, and the third. Each crystal-clear orb contained a perfect representation of Francesca as she strode through the jungle, past the trees where the apples had grown.

The first apple had captured her full-length, a short, slim, childlike figure striding out, arms swinging—all radiation silvers and massed midnight hair. In the second apple she was closer; just her head and shoulders showed. Cramer stared at her elfin face, her high cheekbones, and jade green eyes. Then the third apple: She was striding away from the tree, only her narrow back and fall of hair visible. Tears coursed down his cheeks.

He held the apples in cupped hands and shook his head. He was hardly able to find the words to thank the Abbot. Just the other day he had been bewailing the fact that he had but half a dozen photographs of Francesca. That the holy man had come all the way to Earth to give him these...

"I... Thank you. I don't know what to say."

Then Cramer stopped. Perhaps the whiskey had clouded his senses. He stared at the Abbot.

"How did you find these?" he asked.

"When you left," said the Abbot, "I continued north. At the time, if you recall, I was following directions given to me by a boatman on the river St. Augustine. They proved fallacious, as ever, and rather than continue farther north and risk losing my way, I retraced my steps, returned to the plateau where we had camped." He was silent for a time. Cramer was back on Tartarus Major, so graphically did the Abbot's words conjure up the scene, so painful were his memories of the events upon the plateau.

"When I reached the clearing, it occurred to me to pray for Francesca. I fell to my knees and felt for the totem I had planted to mark her resting place, only to find that it was not there. Moreover, I discovered that the piled earth of the grave had been disturbed, that the grave was indeed empty."

Cramer tried to cry out loud, but no sound came.

"In consternation I stumbled back to my tent. She was waiting for me."

"No!"

"Yes. Francesca. She spoke to me, 'Abbot, do not fear. Something wondrous has happened.'"

Cramer was shaking his head. "No, she was dead. Dead. I buried her with my own hands."

"Francesca lives," the Abbot insisted. "She told me that she knew the whereabouts of the holy temple. She would show me, if I did as she bid."

"Which was?"

He smiled, and the approximation of such a cheerful expression upon a face so devastated was ghastly to behold. "She wanted me to come to Earth and fetch you back to Tartarus. She gave me the image apples as proof."

Cramer could only shake his head like something clockwork. "I don't... I can't believe it."

"Look upon the images," he ordered.

Cramer held the baubles high. "But surely these are images of Francesca *before* I arrived on Tartarus, before her death?"

"Look closely! See, she carries your laser, the one you left in your flight from the clearing."

He stared again, disbelieving. He had overlooked it before, so slight a side-arm it was. But sure enough—strapped to Francesca's thigh was the silver length of his personal pulse laser.

"She wants you," the Abbot said in a whisper.

Cramer wept and raged. He hurled his empty whiskey bottle through the air and into the jungle, which accepted it with hardly a pause in the cacophonous medley of insects, toads, and birds.

"But the sun might blow at any time," he cried.

"Some experts say a month or two." The Abbot paused. "But vain and rapacious men still pilot illegal boats to Tartarus, to raid the treasures that remain. I leave the day after tomorrow. You will accompany me, I take it?"

Sobbing, unable to control himself, wracked with guilt and a fear he had no hope of understanding, Cramer said that he would indeed accompany the Abbot. How could he refuse?

And so began his return to Tartarus Major. He cursed the twisted machinations of fate. A little under four months ago he had set out on his first voyage to the planet, in a bid to find a Francesca he feared was surely dead—and, now, he left with the Abbot aboard a ramshackle sailship, its crew a gallery of rogues, to be reunited with a Francesca he knew for sure to be dead, but somehow miraculously risen...

He chose to spend the voyage under sedation.

THE FIRST HE KNEW OF THE LANDING WAS WHEN THE ABBOT COAXED him awake with his croaking, cracking voice. Cramer emerged reluctantly from his slumber, recalling vague, nightmare visions of Francesca's death—only to be confronted by another nightmare vision: the Abbot's mutilated visage, staring down at him.

"To your feet. Tartarus awaits."

He gathered his scant belongings—six flasks of whiskey, the image

apples—and stumbled from the ship.

As he emerged into the terrible daylight, the assault of Tartarus upon his every sense seemed to sober him. He stared about like a man awakening from a dream, taking in the panorama of ancient wooden buildings around the port, their façades and steep, tiled roofs seeming warped by the intense heat.

Theirs was the only ship in sight, its silver superstructure an arrogant splash of color against a sun-leached dun and ochre city. A searing wind souged across the port, blowing hot grit into Cramer's face. He gazed at the magnesium-bright sun that filled half the sky. The very atmosphere of the planet seemed to be on fire. The air was heavy with the stench of brimstone, and every breath was a labor.

The leader of the thieves stood beneath the nose cone of the ship. "We set sail for Earth in two days," he said. "If you want passage back, be here at dawn. We'll not be waiting."

Cramer calculated how long it might take to reach the jungle plateau and return—certainly longer than two days. He trusted there would be other pirate boats to take him back to civilization.

Already the Abbot was hurrying across the port, his armless gait made fastidious with concentration. His dried eyeballs scuffed around his ankles as he went, striking random patterns in the dust. Cramer shouldered his bag and followed.

Unerringly, the holy man led the way down narrow alleys between the tall buildings of the city's ancient quarter. Just four months ago these byways had been thronged with citizens streaming to the port, eager to flee the impending catastrophe. Now they were deserted. The only sound was that of their footsteps and the dry rasp of the Abbot's eyeballs on the cobbles. Between the overreaching eaves, the sky dazzled like superheated platinum. All was still, lifeless.

They descended to the banks of the St. Augustine, its broad green girth flowing sluggishly between the rotten lumber of dilapidated wharves and jetties. The river, usually choked with trading vessels from all along the coast, was empty now; not one boat plied its length.

An urchin fell into step beside the Abbot and tugged at his robes. They came to a boathouse, and the Abbot shouldered open the door and stepped carefully aboard a longboat. Cramer climbed in after him and seated himself on cushions beneath the black and scarlet awning. The Abbot sat forward, at the very prow of the launch, while the boy busied himself with the engine. Seconds later it spluttered into life, a blasphemy upon the erstwhile silence, and the boat surged from the open-ended boathouse and headed upriver, into the interior.

Cramer pulled a flask of whiskey from his bag and chugged down three mouthfuls, the quantity he judged would keep him afloat until the serious drinking began at sunset. The Abbot had thought to provision the launch with a container of food: biltongs, rounds of ripe cheese, cobs of black bread, and yellow, wizened fruit like pears. A goblet suggested that they should take from the river for their refreshment: Cramer decided to stick to his whiskey. He ate his fill, lay back, and closed his eyes as the boat bounced upstream. He must have dozed; when he next opened his eyes he saw that they had left the city far behind. Flat fields spread out on either hand; tall crops, perhaps green once, were scorched now the color of straw beneath the merciless midday sun.

He thought of Francesca, considered the possibility of her resurrection, and somehow withheld his tears. To busy himself, to take his mind off what might lie ahead, he dipped the goblet into the river and carried it to where the Abbot was seated cross-legged at the prow like some proud and macabre figurehead.

He raised the brimming goblet to the holy man's lips. Graciously, the Abbot inclined his head and drank thirstily. When the cup was dry, he murmured his thanks.

Cramer remained seated beside him. Already he was soaked with sweat and uncomfortable, and he wore the lightest of jungle wear. The Abbot was surely marinating within the thick hessian of his habit.

Cramer nodded to where his sleeves were tucked inside their shoulder holes. "Yet more penance since we last met," he observed, his tone sarcastic.

He wondered when the Abbot would have his tongue pulled out, his legs amputated, his testicles removed—if they had not been removed already.

"After finding Francesca," the Abbot said, "I made my way back to Baudelaire. I informed the Church Council of the miracle in the jungle and petitioned them for permission to undergo *penance physique*. The following day the Surgeon Master removed my arms."

Cramer let the silence stretch. He felt dizzy with the heat. The glare of the sun seemed to drive needles into his eyes. The boat changed course slightly and passed a sandbank. Dead birds and other bloated animals floated by.

"And Francesca?" Cramer whispered.

The Abbot turned his cowl to Cramer, suggesting inquiry.

Cramer cleared his throat. "Why does she want me with her?"

"She did not say." The Abbot paused. "Perhaps she loves you, still."

"But what exactly did she tell you?"

"She said that I was to bring you back to Tartarus. In return, she would guide me to the temple."

Cramer shook his head. "How does she know its whereabouts? Months ago, like you, she had no idea."

"She was bequeathed its location in her sleep."

He cried aloud. "In her sleep? Sleep? She was dead. I buried her myself." He was sobbing now. "How can she possibly be alive?"

The Abbot would say no more, no matter how much Cramer pleaded. He lowered his head, and his lips moved in soothing prayer.

Cramer took sanctuary beneath the awning. He sucked down half a flask of whiskey as night failed, as ever, to fall. The bloated sun dipped below the flat horizon, but such was the power of its radiation that the night sky was transformed into a flickering canopy of indigo, scarlet, and argent streamers. The light show illuminated the entirety of the eastern sky, and against it the Abbot was a stark and frightening silhouette.

Cramer drank himself to sleep.

He was awakened by a crack of thunder such as he had never heard before. He shot upright, convinced that the sun had blown and that Tartarus had split asunder. Sheet lightning flooded the river and the surrounding flatlands in blinding silver explosions, a cooling breeze blew, and a warm rain lashed the boat. He slept.

It was dawn when he was next awakened, this time by a high, blood-curdling cry. He struggled to his feet, the boat rocking dangerously, to find the Abbot on his knees, cowl thrown back, his mutilated face raised to the heavens. He cried out again, paused, then gave vent to another, even longer and louder howl. The boat was idling along at walking pace.

The sun was a massive, rising semicircle on the horizon, throwing harsh white light across the land. In this illumination Cramer made out, to starboard, the precincts of an ancient temple complex. Many buildings were ruins; others, miraculously, considering their age, stood tall and proud. Towers and minarets of some effulgent stone like marble, they were sufficiently alien in design to inspire awe in the passing traveler. As the boat sailed slowly by, Cramer made out six statues—long, scorpion-like insects, tails hooked in readiness.

The Abbot's ululations ceased, replaced by constant murmurings. They left behind the temple complex and the last of the farmland. Presently they entered a dense tangle of vegetation, leaves as broad as spinnakers, waxy and wilting in the increased temperature. The river narrowed, became a chocolate-colored canal between the overgrown banks. The sun was hidden partially by the treetops, and they were spared its direct heat, yet in the confines of the jungle the humidity increased so that every labored inhalation was more a draught of fluid than a drawn breath.

Cramer breakfasted on stale bread and putrescent cheese, thirst

driving him to forego his earlier circumspection as to the potability of the water and draw a goblet from the river. He gave the Abbot a mouthful of the brackish liquid and arranged bread and biltongs beside him so that the holy fool might not starve. The Abbot ate, using his toes to grip the food and lift it to his mouth in a fashion so dextrous as to suggest much practice before the amputation of his arms.

They proceeded on a winding course along the river, ever farther into the dense and otherwise impenetrable jungle.

Hours later they came to Chardon's Landing. Cramer made the launch fast to the jetty and assisted the Abbot ashore. They paused briefly to take a meal and then began the arduous slog to the plateau where Cramer had buried Francesca.

The air was heavy, the light aqueous, filled with the muffled, distant calls of doomed animals and birds. The trek to the plateau was tougher than he recalled from his first time this way. After months of drunkenness he was in far from peak condition, and without his arms the Abbot often stumbled.

As the hours passed and they slogged through the cloying, hostile heat, Cramer considered what the holy man had said about Francesca's resurrection. Clearly, he had not killed her in the clearing all those months ago, but merely stunned her—and she had discovered the whereabouts of the temple from the survey photographs made by the *Pride of Valencia*. Then again, there was always the possibility that the Abbot was lying, that Francesca had not risen at all, that he had lured Cramer here for his own sinister purposes. And the image apples, which seemed to show Francesca in possession of the laser that had killed her? Might she not have been carrying a laser similar to his own after the crash-landing and before he arrived, at which time the apples had recorded her image?

They came at last to the clearing. The two tents were as he recalled them, situated 30 meters apart. Francesca's grave, in the jungle, was out of sight.

Cramer hurried across to Francesca's tent and pulled back the flap. She was not inside. He checked the second tent, also empty, and then walked toward the edge of the escarpment. He looked out across the spread of the jungle far below, gathering his thoughts.

He knew that he would find Francesca's grave untouched.

"If you claim she is risen," he called to the Abbot, "then where is she?"

"If you do not believe me," the Abbot said, "then look upon the grave."

Cramer hesitated. He did not know what he feared most, that he should find the grave empty... or the soil still piled above Francesca's cold remains.

He crossed the clearing to the margin of jungle in which he had excavated her resting place. The Abbot's cowl turned, following his progress like some gothic tracking device. Cramer reached out and drew aside a spray of ferns. The light fell from behind him, illuminating a raw furrow of earth. He gave a pained cry. The mound he had so carefully constructed was scattered, the depression where he had laid out her body hollow once again.

He stumbled back into the clearing.

"Well?" the Abbot inquired.

Before Cramer could grasp him, beat from him the truth, he saw something spread in the center of the clearing. It was a detailed map of the area, based on aerial photographs, opened out and held flat by four stones.

The Abbot sensed something. "What is wrong?"

Cramer crossed the clearing and knelt before the map. Marked in red was the campsite, and from it a dotted trail leading down the precipitous fall of the escarpment. It wound through the jungle below, to a point Cramer judged to be 10 kilometers distant. This area was marked with a circle, and beside it the words, "The Slarque Temple," in Francesca's meticulous, childish print.

"My God," Cramer whispered to himself.

"What is it?"

Cramer told the Abbot, and he raised his ravaged face to the heavens. "Thanks be!" he cried. "The Age of Miracles is forever here!"

Cramer snatched up the map, folded it to a manageable size, and strode to the edge of the escarpment. He turned to the Abbot. "Are you up to another hard slog?"

"God gives strength to the pilgrim," the holy man almost shouted. "Lead the way, Mr. Cramer!"

For the next two hours they made a slow descent of the incline. So steep was the drop in places that the Abbot was unable to negotiate the descent through the undergrowth, and Cramer was forced to carry him on his back.

He murmured holy mantras into Cramer's ear.

He found it impossible to assess his emotions at that time, still less his thoughts—disbelief, perhaps, maybe even fear of the unknown. He entertained the vague hope that Francesca, having completed her quest and found the temple, might return with him to Earth.

They came to the foot of the incline and pressed ahead through dense vegetation. From time to time they came across what Cramer hoped was the track through the undergrowth that Francesca might have made, only to lose it again just as quickly. Their progress was slow, with frequent halts so that Cramer could consult the map and the position of the bloated sun. He wondered if it was a psychosomatic reaction to the events of the past few hours, or a meteorological change, that made the air almost impossible to breathe. It seemed sulphurous, infused with the miasma of Hell itself. Certainly, the Abbot was taking labored breaths through his ruined nose-holes.

At last they emerged from the jungle and found themselves on the edge of a second great escarpment, where the land stepped down to yet another sweep of sultry jungle. Cramer studied the map. According to Francesca, the temple was positioned somewhere along this ledge. They turned right and pushed through fragrant leaves and hanging fronds. Cramer could see nothing that might resemble an alien construct.

Then, amid a tangle of undergrowth 10 meters ahead, he made out a regular, right-angled shape he knew was not the work of nature. It was small, perhaps four meters high and two wide—a rectangular block of masonry overgrown with lichen and creepers. He detected signs that someone had passed this way, and recently: The undergrowth leading to the stone block was broken, trampled down.

"What is it?" the Abbot whispered.

Cramer described what he could see.

"The shrine," the holy man said. "It has to be..."

They approached the Slarque temple. Cramer was overcome with a strange disappointment that it should turn out to be so small, so insignificant. Then, as they passed into its shadow, he realized that this was but a tiny part of a much greater, subterranean complex. He peered and saw a series of steps disappearing into the gloom. Ten-

drils, like tripwires, had been broken on the upper steps.

Cramer took the Abbot's shoulder and assisted him down the steps. Just as he began to fear that their way would be in complete darkness, he made out a glimmer of light below. The steps came to an end. A corridor ran off to the right, along the face of the escarpment. Let into the stone of the cliff face itself, at regular intervals, were tall apertures like windows. Great shafts of sunlight poured in and illuminated the way.

He walked the Abbot along the wide corridor, its ceiling carved with a bas-relief of cavorting animals. In the lichen carpet that had spread across the floor over the millennia, he made out more than one set of footprints: The lichen was scuffed and darkened, as if with the passage of many individuals.

At last, after perhaps a kilometer, they approached the tall, arched entrance of a great chamber. At first he thought it a trick of his ears, or the play of the warm wind within the chamber, but as they drew near he heard the dolorous monotone of a sustained religious chant. The sound, in precincts so ancient, sent a shiver down his spine.

They paused on the threshold. From a wide opening at the cliff-face end of the chamber, evening sunlight slanted in, its brightness blinding. When his eyes adapted Cramer saw, through a haze of tumbling dust motes, row upon row of gray-robed, kneeling figures, cowed heads bowed, chanting. The chamber was the size of a cathedral and the congregation filled the long stone pews on either side of a central aisle. The heat and the noise combined to make Cramer dizzy.

He felt a hand grip his elbow and thought at first that it was the Abbot. He turned—a monk stood to his left, holding his upper arm; the Abbot was on Cramer's right, his broken face suffused with devotional rapture.

He felt pressure on his elbow. Like an automaton, he stepped into the chamber. The monk escorted Cramer up the aisle. The continuous chanting, now that they were amid it, was deafening. The sunlight was hot on his back. The front of the chamber was lost in shadow. He could just make out the hazy outline of a scorpion-analogue statue, and beside it the representation of a torso upon a cross.

Halfway down the aisle, they paused.

The monk's grip tightened on his arm. The Abbot whispered to Cramer. His expression was beatific, his tone rapturous. "In the year of the supernova, it is written that the Ultimate Sacrifice will rise from the dead, and so be marked out to appease the sun. Too, it is written that the sacrifice will be accompanied by a nonbeliever, and also the Abbot of the true Church."

Cramer could hardly comprehend his words.

The monk pushed him forward. The chanting soared.

He stared. What he had assumed to be the statue of a body on a cross was not a statue at all. His mind refused to accept the image that his vision was relaying. He almost passed out. The monk held him upright.

Francesca hung before him, lashed to the vertical timber of the cross, the ultimate sacrifice in what must have been the most God-forsaken Calvary ever devised by man. Her head was raised at a proud angle, the expression on her full lips that of a grateful martyr. Her eyelids were closed, flattened like the Abbot's, and stitched in a semicircle beneath each eye. The threads obtruded from her perfect skin, thick and clotted like obscene, cartoon lashes.

Her evicted eyes, as green as Cramer remembered them, were tied about her neck.

Her arms and legs had been removed, amputated at shoulder and hip; silver discs capped the stumps. They had even excised her small, high breasts, leaving perfect white, sickle-shaped scars across her olive skin.

Cramer murmured his beloved's name.

She moved her head, and that tiny gesture, lending animation to something that by all rights should have been spared life, twisted a blade of anguish deep into his heart.

"Hans!" she said, her voice sweet and pure. "Hans, I told you that I loved you, would love you forever." She smiled, a smile of such beauty

Continued on page 95

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Romas can confidently deliver
SF's special sense of wonder, as
in this cover image to the novel
Rediscovery by Marion Zimmer
Bradley and Mercedes Lackey.

It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Romas



The magic palette of Romas Kukalis has won a World Fantasy Award and the acclaim of art lovers everywhere.

There are two elements, says World Fantasy Award-winning artist Romas Kukalis—whose SF work appears under the singular name of Romas—that every artist should be lucky enough to have in his or her life: a spouse who is also an artist and Lithuanian roots.

About the former, he says, "I don't know how other artists who aren't married to artists function. I wouldn't like it. I wouldn't do it."

And about those roots? "Lithuanians are known for their dark moods. I have demons that I deal with, and they're very useful in my work."

Demons—and spouses—aside, this artist's technical skills, unusual imagination, and intriguing use of color have kept him busy as an illustrator of science fiction and fantasy for over 20 years. His particular sensibility brings an earthy realism to the most unearthly subject matter.

Romas is a color wizard: His startling combinations of hues keep the viewer's eye just where he wants it. The artist often favors the darker side of the palette to frame his subjects, reserving dynamic color complements and triadic harmonies for the focal point of the work. He's equally fearless with vertiginous angles, leaving viewers uncertain as to just what direction they are looking in: up, down, or sideways?

BY KAREN HABER



LEFT: The artist is equally at home both with people and with the immense technological marvels of tomorrow. BELOW: *The Wheel of Fortune* demonstrates the artist's sly sense of humor. RIGHT: Carefully composed action is at the core of *Razor's Edge*.

went immediately to work for book and magazine publishers and advertising agencies in New York City.

Although he's devoted much of his career to science fiction and fantasy genre art, working for Berkley/Ace and DAW among others, he's also illustrated outside of the field for *Reader's Digest*, *TV Guide*, Marvel Comics, Union Carbide, Seagrams, Hasbro, and other commercial clients.

In addition, his work has appeared in video and computer games, and on puzzles, posters, and audio cassettes. His work has been featured at the Museum of American Art, Society of Illustrators, and various galleries in New York and Chicago. He's currently working on a series of books tied to the recent *Lost in Space* film, as well as a number of the popular "Animorph" books. Just completed are package art for Microsoft's new computer game, *Age of Empires*, and designs for historical figurines for The Franklin Mint.

As if that weren't enough, he's also worked with his wife Allison Barrows, a writer and artist, whom he met in art school. In addition to daughter Alex, 8, and son Guyon, 4, Romas and Allison have collaborated on *The Artist's Model* and *The Artist's Friends* (Carolrhoda, Inc., 1997, 1998). These books tell the story of their daughter Alex's adventures when she posed for a painting for her father at a professional studio in New York City.

"Alex posed for *The Spear of Heaven* [by Judith Tarr, for Tor] when she was three and a half," says Romas. "I took her down to New York with me, and she was just unbelievable. That's where the two books came from."

This is especially true of his cover painting for my novel *Sister Blood* (DAW, 1996). Here Romas has shown the protagonist, Kayla, descending into the heart of a frozen planet where the inhabitants live underground.

Behind her, at an angle, are the planet doors through which can be seen the curve of a neighboring world. Around her is a dim, mysterious passage. The only points of light are the slice of pale green sky above and the spears of fire-red stalactites below. This clever bit of compositional—and chromatic—opposition is the work of a real pro. Romas uses analogous warm colors to rivet your attention to Kayla's "descent into hell."

Not only is this painting impressive for its use of color, it's also a terrific stunt of perspective. In how many other paintings is the center of the action—and the brightest part of the work—the bottom of the subject's feet?

The cover painting for *Ghost Shadows* (by Cheryl Franklin, DAW, 1996) utilizes a cooler palette but is no less powerful in its effects. The heroic subject here is set against a light background of split complementary blue and red tints—in fact, he's the dividing line between these colors. Despite the monochromatic tones of his clothing, the hero holds the viewer's attention thanks to the intense white light above his head—providing a halo effect—and Romas's considerable powers of representation. This noble figure might have stepped directly out of a Renaissance painting.

"I really enjoyed doing this painting," Romas says. "I put a heroic medieval character into this futuristic background. And doing the aliens was so much fun. I loved them."

After a childhood spent reading and copying comic books, Romas graduated with honors from Paier College of Art in New Haven and





BELOW: One of Romas' recent media adventures has been painting a series of covers for *Lost in Space* Young Adult novelizations. RIGHT: Romas captures the action as a samurai takes on a cyborg.

Unsurprisingly, Alex is interested in art but her father doesn't want to encourage her. "She does her own comic strip and writes her own books. But I want a lot more for her. The digital world is here and the art world is changing. The money's not there anymore."

Alex's parents share a workspace at home and work the same hours—often long ones—without any collateral damage to the marriage. In fact, Romas sings the praises of working with his spouse. "Allison is essential. She'll critique my work. There's never been a case where I've sent out a finished piece without her approval."

In tribute to their relationship, the artist includes his wife's name, "Al," in every painting, hidden someplace. "Sometimes I hide it so well that it takes a while for me to find it."

Romas begins his cover paintings, as do most artists, by reading the manuscript. "I like to underline or pull pages out," he says. "Then I do little doodles, little value and color studies, and submit them to the art director."

Rather than bristle at artistic suggestions, Romas welcomes them. "Often the suggestions I've gotten from people have been very, very good ones."

Once he receives the go-ahead, he poses and photographs models as reference material. "I used to go down to New York and have it done professionally. But it's a long drive from New Hampshire."

Although Romas uses the photos, he prefers not to be too reliant on them. "I'm always correcting the perspective, the anatomy, and so forth. The photos are only a tool. They can be deceptive."



This is one artist who refuses to go hi-tech. "It's not that I'm a Luddite. I'm actually fascinated by technology. But I don't even have a computer. And I have no intention of creating digitalized art."

Each painting takes him approximately three weeks to complete. He works in acrylics, having moved to them from oils for their ease in handling, quick drying time, and lack of toxicity.

"Acrylics are so versatile. You can use them thin or thick. I began in oils but they drove me nuts. Plodding. The drying time. So I started using acrylics and it was a real 'baptism by paint.' I just kept at it until I got the look that I wanted.

"Now I've come full circle—I'm at a point where I want to use oils again—I think I might use them the way I would acrylics." Asked about his color schemes—and his favoring of dark hues as a framing device, Romas says, "It must go back to my Lithuanian roots and all that time my ancestors spent lurking in the Black Forest."

The artist obviously enjoys using unexpected color combinations to achieve certain effects. He says that there are no rules for the perfect science fiction painting: "You've just got to make unbelievable things look realistic." But above all, what he requires for his creative process is absolute quiet. Perhaps that's why he moved to New Hampshire.

"New Hampshire is filled with artists and writers—people getting away from the rat race. It's about quality of life. I was born in Canada and grew up in Connecticut, and there was no way I wanted to live in an urban environment."

Chief among his goals for the future is to do more personal work. "I want to expand and keep going. I've been lucky to get involved in different things over the years and I want that to continue. I'd also like to concentrate on more realism and portraiture. Paintings for me." □

An astronaut passes above Washington, D.C. in Laurel Ransom's *The Fugitive Stars*.



One day, a simple operation will make it easy for you to be all that you can be.

But think long and hard before you decide to go ahead,
for in the future, knowing thyself can be a dangerous thing.

The Identity Factory

1.

LOU GRENDAL FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE Identity Factory from his cousin Mel, when he called from the airport to cancel their squash game.

"Can't make it," he said. "I'm going mountain climbing in the Himalayas."

"Mountain climbing? But you're afraid of heights."

You're afraid of your own shadow, he wanted to say, but held back.

"That's true enough," Mel said. "Or at least, it *was* true. I was afraid of heights, and almost everything else. The old me *was* a cringing coward, afraid to face life's challenges. But that's all over with. The new me is brave and strong and powerful."

Lou held the phone farther away from his ear. At the very least, Mel *sounded* different; usually soft-spoken and tentative, he was now loud and forceful, if not to say downright bombastic.

"What's up, Mel? You on Prozac or something?"

"Better. I've been to the Identity Factory."

"The where?"

"It's the new thing, Lou. And I got in on the ground floor. Soon everyone is going to be getting themselves a whole new identity."

"Oh, I get it," Lou said. "Kind of like the Witness Protection Program."

"You've got a good sense of humor, Lou. But sometimes you hide behind it, shutting out anything that's new and scary. I'm sure you don't mind me telling you that."

"Feel free."

"You might want to see a dentist about your gums, too. They look like they're receding."

Lou wasn't sure that he liked the new, more forceful Mel. "Anything else that's been bothering you?"

"Plenty, but we can catch up later. The point is, this Identity Factory thing works. I've been through it all... analysis, Gestalt, Roling, ST, NLP, TM, channeling, dream work. None of it really helped. This one does. You become who you really want to be."

"But how...?"

"Gotta go, Lou, they're calling my flight. But you'll be hearing plenty about it soon, you bet."

2.

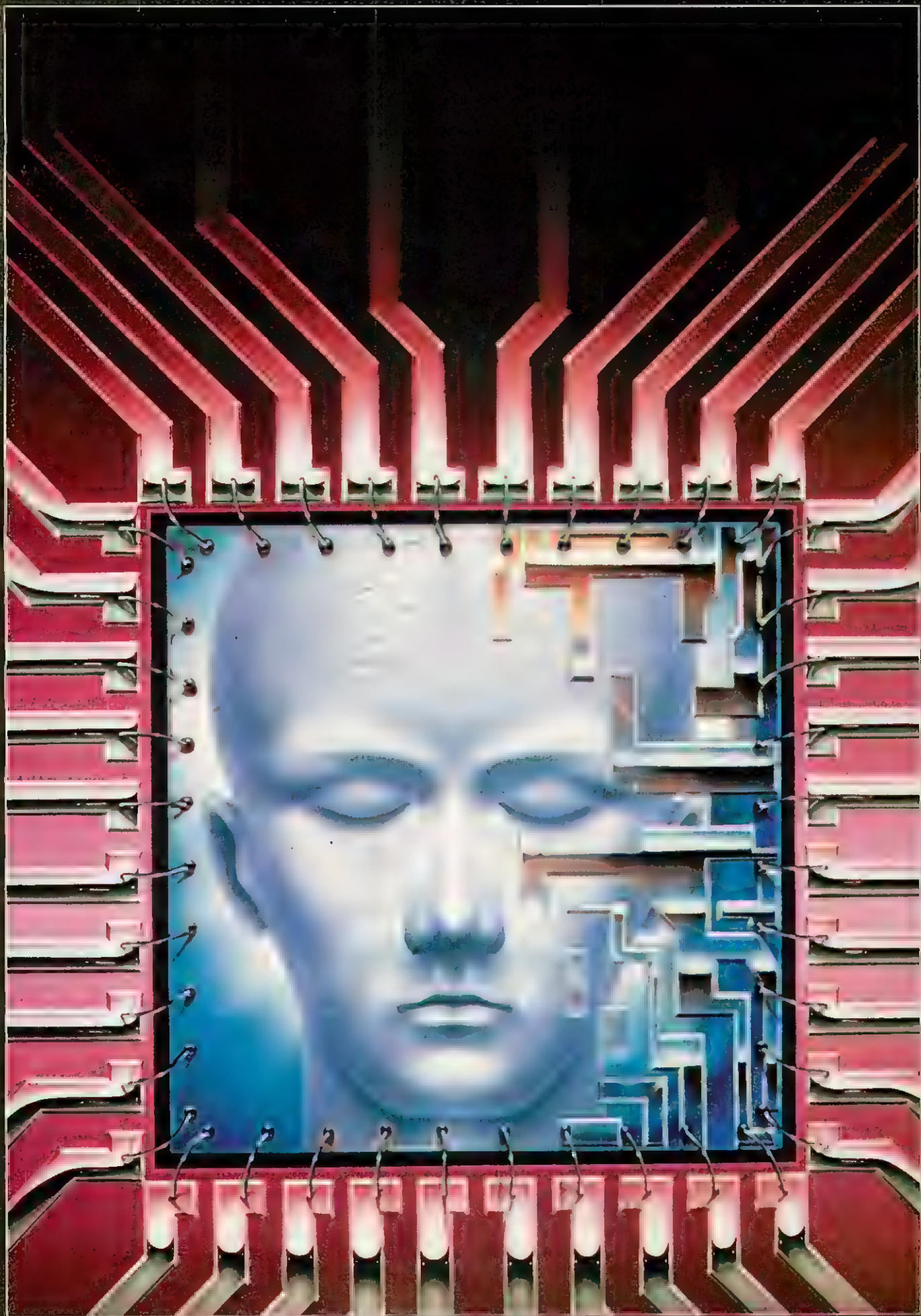
LOU HEARD MORE ABOUT THE Identity Factory the very next day.

He had just finished screening the last segment of *The Manchurian Candidate* for his PopCult 101 section. He screened old movies as often as he could. It got him off his feet, it let him slip out to his office to make a few calls or take a nap when he was feeling really beat. And the students liked it, too. No one could say that Lou had not learned a trick or two in coasting through 10 years as a community college lecturer.

Today he had hoped to use the movie to lead a review of conspiracy motifs in American popular culture, from the Kennedy assassination through to *The X-Files*. But his students mostly wanted to talk about how the Lawrence Harvey character had been brainwashed by his Red Chi-

BY ANDREW WEINER

Illustration by Barclay Shaw



nese captors and transformed into an assassination weapon.

"Is that really possible?" asked a worried-looking blonde girl in the front row. "To change someone's personality like that? Like flipping a switch?"

Lou shrugged. "You'd have to ask your psych professor. Although personally I don't think it's possible."

"What about Patty Hearst?" someone asked.

"That's a good point. Maybe we should take a look at the Schrader movie . . ."

"What about the Identity Factory?" asked the worried-looking girl. "You know, that new place they're advertising on the radio where they change your life in seven days, satisfaction guaranteed or your money refunded."

Lou frowned slightly. This was getting off the point, but he was interested despite himself.

"I heard something about that."

"Our next-door neighbor went to become more assertive. Now she's become a lesbian and she's moving to Yellowknife."

"Why Yellowknife?" Lou couldn't help but ask. But the student didn't know.

3. THAT NIGHT, LOU WENT FOR DINNER AT HIS SISTER Audrey's house. Audrey was married to Max, who owned a paint supply store downtown. Lou liked his sister and her husband well enough, and he was not usually one to pass up a free meal. But he tried to avoid eating at Audrey's, because she was such a terrible cook. Which was probably why Max was rail-thin. Lou had tried to duck out of this dinner, too, but Audrey had been insistent, hinting at important news.

As it turned out, dinner was spectacular. Starting out with broiled shrimp in coconut sauce, moving through a three-leaf salad and a palate-cleansing lemon sherbet to stuffed quail and *crème brûlée*, it was all delicious.

"This is great, Audrey," Lou said. "Outstanding."

"I wish I could take the credit," Audrey said. "But it was Max."

"Max?" Lou turned to stare at his brother-in-law in astonishment. "I didn't know you could cook."

"Couldn't boil an egg," Max said. "But now I can, thanks to the Identity Factory. In fact I'm selling the store and opening a restaurant."

"But why?"

"I was doing all right," Max said. "Great wife, wonderful kids, a nice house, a good business. But always there was something . . . missing. Then I read a flier about this new Identity Factory. So I went down to hear what they had to say. And I decided to give it a try. They gave me a bunch of tests. And it turned out that I ought to be a chef."

"But even so," Lou said, "how do you become an expert chef overnight?"

"First you have a little operation," Max said, pulling back his right ear to reveal a tiny socket.

Lou recoiled. "They drill a hole in your head?"

"Just a little one. Local anesthetic. Then you plug in the program. You can buy it off the shelf, or have one customized. And it gives you what you need. I have the skills, the recipes, and the confidence of a topflight *ordon bleu* chef."

"What's it like?" Lou asked. "Being someone else?"

"Oh, I'm still me. Underneath, I'm still me."

Whoever that was, Lou thought, staring uneasily at his happy, flushed, and noticeably-more-plump brother-in-law. Because he didn't know this person at all.

4. AFTER DINNER, LOU WENT OVER TO MARIE'S apartment. Marie taught Women's Studies at the college where he worked. They had been seeing each other for a while, although it was nothing intense. He had invited Marie to accompany him to Audrey's house, but she had preferred to stay home to watch a feminist British detective show on PBS.

"What kind of a world is this?" Lou asked, after he had told Marie

about Max. "Where someone would do something like that?"

"Why wouldn't they?" Marie asked. "It's the next logical step, after all. People buy clothes, cars, houses to reflect who they are, or want to be. I mean, every second staff member at college drives a Volvo, because they think it's professorial or something. Why stop there? Why not go out and buy a personality, too?"

"But it's not the same thing," he protested. "To give up your personality, your individuality, your dignity as a human being . . ."

"Maybe Max never had much of a personality to begin with. Besides, you said he was unhappy. Unfulfilled."

"Unhappy!" He snorted. "Who said he was supposed to be happy? Whoever said that was part of the deal?"

5. LOU'S DEADHEAD FRIEND, AL, WAS THE NEXT TO GO. Al worked as a dispatcher for a courier company. But he lived for the Grateful Dead. He spent endless hours logging on to Usenet discussion groups. Trading tapes around the world, he had amassed thousands of hours of live Dead performances. Since the death of Jerry Garcia and the dissolution of the group he had, if anything, become even more fanatical in his completism.

Lou didn't have quite the same enthusiasm. But he liked to dabble, and had accumulated a small tape collection of his own. Once or twice a month he would visit with Al and a couple of his other Dead-head friends and they would get stoned—Al always had the best grass—and play some new tapes.

"Hey Al," Lou said, when he called to confirm the next get-together. "We still on for Friday? I just picked up this terrific early performance of 'Viola Lee Blues...'"

"Well actually," Al said, and his voice was strained, "I was going to call you about that. You see, I've got tickets for a show that night."

"Oh," Lou said. "I didn't know anyone interesting was in town."

"Tony Bennett," Al said. "I'm going to see Tony Bennett."

"Oh," Lou said. "Well, that's cool, I guess. Maybe next Friday then."

"Actually I was going to see Billy Joel."

"You kidding me, Al?"

"No. I know it sounds strange, but it's like my ears have been opened to other kinds of music. I've realized that there's more to life than the Dead. In fact, since I went to the Identity Factory, I can't even listen to them anymore. Which is just as well, since I really don't have much free time, now that I'm working for my real estate license."

"You went to the Identity Factory? But why, Al? Why?"

"Because I was wasting my life, that's why."

"And selling real estate is an improvement?"

"People need houses, Lou. It's a shelter and an investment, the best you can make. In fact, this is a terrific time to get in on the market, what with interest rates being so low..."

6. HIS EX-WIFE CHARLOTTE CALLED. THEY HADN'T spoken in two years, and the last occasion had been a screaming match at her lawyer's office.

At first, Lou was suspicious. What more does she want of me, he wondered? I have no more. But as it turned out, she wanted to give.

"I wanted to say goodbye," she said, "and to forgive you."

"Forgive me? You were the one who was screwing around."

"Only because you drove me to it by being so emotionally distant and ungiving. But there's two sides to every story and if I was at fault I offer you my heartfelt apologies."

In all the years he had known her, Charlotte had never apologized for anything.

"I also wanted to let you know that I'm sending you a check. I'm repaying your settlement. I don't need the money, and I've transcended my petty economic insecurities."

"Are you feeling all right, Charlotte?"

"Never better. I'm leaving for India tomorrow, to work with lepers."

"Let me guess. You went to the Identity Factory."

"And became the generous person I always wanted to be. How about you, Lou? Thinking of trying it?"

"I'm fine just the way I am."

"Teaching cultural studies in community college? Come on Lou. There must have been *something* you really wanted to do. Write. Paint. Make films."

"Not really."

"You want more, Lou. You're just too afraid to admit it, even to yourself."

"I like my life just the way it is," he told her.

He thought of himself as a pretty good teacher, all things considered. Maybe he was a little too easygoing. Maybe he didn't inspire his students. But at least he kept most of them awake, most of the time, which was as much as you could really hope for.

Oh, sure, he had once had other dreams. He had wanted to make films, or at least write film criticism. Teaching college had just been a stopgap. But the years had gone by, and he never had done anything else. Which suggested that he had never really wanted to do anything else.

And still, he couldn't help wondering if Charlotte might be right.

7. DRIVING HOME FROM WORK, LOU HEARD A COMMERCIAL for the Identity Factory. They were holding free public presentations in a hotel near the airport, every hour on the hour. "*Learn about the new process that is about to change your world ... New identities from \$399.95. All major credit cards accepted.*"

It was strange, he thought, the way this Identity Factory had suddenly appeared from nowhere. Spooky, almost, like some kind of secret alien invasion ... like in Carpenter's *They Live*, or something. But most likely it was just capitalism as usual.

It was a scam, anyway. Just another fad, another cult, another McTherapy, another way of milking hapless, brainwashed consumers of their hard-earned savings.

But then again, what if it worked?

What if it really worked?

8. MARIE CALLED AS HE WALKED IN THE DOOR. "I'm going to the Identity Factory presentation at 9:00," she told him. "Want to come?"

"You're not serious?"

"I want to find out what this is about."

"You'll never come back," he said. "You'll go off to become a water ski instructor in Bali."

"I don't necessarily plan to *do* anything. I want to explore my options."

"But you love teaching."

"Not all the time," she said. "And it's not just a matter of my work. It's my whole *life*. Maybe I want to have kids, or run for office, or travel round the world."

Lou felt a sudden panic. Not Marie, too.

"Can't you see," he said desperately, "it's society that's doing this to you? Making you dissatisfied with your life. So that you run out to buy something, consume something."

"Save it for your section on culture-jamming, Lou. I'm going. How about you?"

"They're showing *Kiss Me Deadly* on channel 19. It's the culmination of film *noir*."

"You can tape it," she said. "Or not."

9. THE SPEAKER ON THE STAGE PACED BACK AND forth, tigerlike, trailing the cord of his hand-held microphone, radiating good health and personal dynamism. He was lean and bronzed and dressed in an expensive-looking silver-gray suit. He wore a white mandarin collar shirt with no tie.

The speaker's name was Calvin Hudson. Or so he claimed. It sounded a little made-up to Lou.

"Freedom of choice," Hudson was saying. "Choose your own personality. Be charming or sly, aggressive or sexy. Be whoever you want to be."

Lou shifted uncomfortably on the folding metal chair and nibbled on a stale doughnut. Beside him, Marie sat in rapt attention.

"Be left-handed or right-handed, Russian or American, a tycoon or a thief..."

The room was packed. It was hot and stuffy and smelled faintly of stale farts. Lou couldn't wait to get out. But he had promised Marie to keep an open mind.

"You ever hear of a lady called Sybil?" the speaker asked. "You ever wondered how she did that? How she could be so many different people at once? What is a multiple personality disorder, really? I'll tell you what it is. It's *self-programming*, that's what it is. It's deciding to be somebody else. And that's exactly what you're going to do. Except, unlike Sybil, you won't have to do it all by yourself, because we're going to help you."

After the speech, Hudson invited the audience to sign up for some "identity work."

"Absolutely no risk, folks," he told them. "All our work comes with a complete guarantee. Money back if not completely satisfied."

The audience stood up as one, and began to file toward the front. Marie stood up too, as if to follow them.

"Marie," he said, putting his hand on her arm. "Don't you want to go home? We can still catch the beginning of *Letterman*."

"I'm going to sign up," she said. Her face was set, determined. "Don't try to stop me."

Something in her gaze made him release her arm.

Watching the crowd shuffling forward eagerly reminded him, inescapably, of the last scene of Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

He fled the room.

10. "NOT SIGNING UP?" SAID THE VOICE from the shadows, as Lou stepped from the hotel into the parking lot. "Could I ask why not?" He turned to see Calvin Hudson, a cigarette cupped in his hand.

"You smoke?" Lou asked, surprised at this apparent display of weakness.

"Only on Wednesdays," Hudson said. "It's under control. So tell me... what's your name?"

"Lou."

"Tell me, Lo ... please call me Cal, by the way... is it the price?" He leaned forward, apparently keenly interested.

"The price seems fair enough. If that's what someone wants. And if you can really deliver it."

"Oh, we deliver it, don't doubt it. But you don't want it?"

"No," Lou said. "It's just not for me."

"Why not?"

"What do you care what I think?"

"That's what we're here for, Lou," Hudson said. "Information." He dropped his cigarette butt on the ground and trod in it. "This is just the pilot phase. We're here to learn everything we can about what works and what doesn't before we roll out nationally."

"Identity Factories in every city?"

"On every block. And we've got a whole world to conquer. This is a bottomless market, Lou. These days, everyone's confused. No one is happy, no one is satisfied. No one knows who the hell they're supposed to be anymore. People are desperate for something like this."

Lou shivered. "Where are you people from? Mars?"

"I'm from Chicago myself." He looked at Lou appraisingly. "So tell me, what's not to like about a new, improved you?"

"I don't know ... It's just so packaged. I mean, I always thought of myself as an individualist, you know. Not a conformist."

"*Individualist*," Hudson echoed, mockingly. "*Conformist*. Words. Meaningless words. Outdated concepts. *This* is the true individualism. Wake up Lou, you're living in modern times now."

"But to change your whole personality..."

Continued on page 94

THE STAR DREAMERS



Beneath the strange stars of a distant world,
it was no surprise that even the travelers themselves
grew more distant.

BY BRUCE BOSTON

Illustration by Michael Dubisch

They froze us instantaneously
for our journey to the stars.
They stacked us tier on tier
in the darkness of the hold.
While generations passed
on the world we left behind
we would age a single day
and know a senseless night,
and then we would awaken
with our youth still at hand.

They said we could not dream,
but oh they were so wrong.
We dreamed a million dreams
in a thousand years of sleep.
We lived without existing
in the landscapes of our minds,
while the silent parsecs passed
and our starship traveled on
to find some world to conquer
where new life could abound.

At last our coffins cracked
and our wintry eyelids thawed.
Our bodies slowly warmed
yet our brains still held a chill.
Our mirrors reflected youth,
unblemished and pristine,
but mirrors can surely lie:
we were wrinkled deep within.
Far more than supple limbs;
youth dwells within the mind.

Now that we've awakened
to confront a waiting world,
we balk at the adventure,
we have spent the urge to try.
We have dreamed so many lies
that our appetite for life
had lost its cutting edge and
been ground down by time.
Dreams are less than real
yet their sum can fill the years.

Beneath a distant saffron sun
that will offer little heat,
we let the steam from our cups
rise against our downy cheeks.
If we plan to survive there
are tasks we should define.
Instead we sit and barter
tales of lives we never lived,
of worlds we never conquered
and things we never did. □

SCIENCE

Continued from page 32

source over which you had no control at all—you couldn't even get to visit it—or would you prefer a dam which, in spite of all its defects, sits on African soil and is at least in some sense under your control?

KOTANI: By all means, wherever it makes sense let us exploit all available options. However, we must remember what the Aswan High Dam entailed. Egyptian agriculture was decimated when the annual flooding of the Nile stopped fertilizing the Delta. Hydroelectric power often entails environmental costs.

SHEFFIELD: There are other problems with dams. Schistosomiasis was introduced in the Nile Delta by the Aswan High Dam, and in the area where the Blue and White Niles meet (known as El Jazire) by the damming of the Blue Nile. But there will be problems with SPS, too, you can count on it.

KOTANI: There are numerous collateral problems created by all manners of energy generation, but dams are among the worst. Quite a bit of work has been done concerning the safety of microwave transmission.

SHEFFIELD: On social issues, I am an optimist when it comes to science and technology progress and a pessimist when it comes to social progress. I think that we will have methods of generating energy and conserving energy far better than SPS, at a time in the future when there will still be haves and have nots. I believe that the developed nations have an interest in helping other nations only to the extent that it does not affect their own material well-being. Now, here is the question: Can an SPS become an insignificant part of a nation's charitable efforts? I think that puts us far enough in the future, in terms of available energy and disposable income, that the world will be hard for us to recognize. I certainly don't think our best thinking (actually, our thinking of 30 years ago) will be their best thinking, a century from now.

KOTANI: SPS need not be a charity project. It can be to the mutual benefit of both have- and have-not nations. If you build a dam or power station, you need to build an infrastructure to transmit the energy over the country. Congo is not a small country, and building an electrical network will be costly. With SPS, we can build as many rectennas as practical in the vicinity of the energy consumption centers—be they cities or factories.

KOTANI: My view toward SPS is that we owe it to ourselves and our descendants to explore this option as fully as practical instead of dismissing the concept as being unneeded, especially seeing that there are few practical options open to us now.

SHEFFIELD: My view of SPS is that it is an idea whose time had come—and gone. Like automobiles powered by fission reactors, SPS is part of the road not taken, a false future predicted by the past. □

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TELEVISION

Continued from page 26

science fiction. The science fiction reader—and viewership—can only gain."

Nebula- and Hugo-nominated writer Adam-Troy Castro recently parodied *Babylon 5* in the pages of *Science Fiction Age*, in a story that showed a clear love for the program. Before he had a chance to see "Sleeping in Light," Castro noted, "My reaction to the imminent close of *Babylon 5* is pretty much exactly the same as my reaction to entering the closing stretch of any long but rewarding book; I can see the inevitability of what's coming, and I'm sufficiently caught up in the story to hope the wrap-up is as terrific as the journey. It's a bittersweet sensation at best, especially since (as with the best epics) *Babylon 5* is not about to give us, its audience, an unreservedly feel-good happy ending."

Castro definitely feels that the show changed television, and for the better. "There are, in any artistic medium, certain works that raise the bar of what's possible, that shut up the helpless complainers by using vivid example to raise the bar of what's possible and what's not. For televised science fiction, *Babylon 5* was such a milestone."

Yvonne Navarro, who has written the novelization for the *Babylon 5* movie *The River of Souls*, also feels that the program has had a positive effect on television. For one thing, she noted that *Babylon 5* has shown "the rest of the industry that you can make high-quality special effects without breaking the bank." But she also has great appreciation for the story.

"It's faster and easier to understand, less technical because of time constraints. On screen, you don't have to explain every single thing in detail. On the other hand, in print you can go much deeper into the minds of characters and their motivations, and you have time to explore things that will never be in the range of a four-minute film scene."

"For me, *Babylon 5* has always been about the characters more than anything else. Second to that is the way the stories weave around each other on an on-going basis. From human to Narn to the strangest alien out there, I find them all fascinating and full of potential stories on their own. I love the way they interact with one another and the way the smallest thing they do can affect someone or something else in the same show...or five shows down the line."

Navarro also wishes the show could continue, but completely understands why it won't. And she looks to the future. "I'm sorry to see it happen...but I also know and accept that this is the way Straczynski always planned it. I'm sure *Crusade* will start an entirely new direction for the *Babylon 5* universe and I'm looking forward to it."

Susan Schwartz, who like Castro has been nominated for both the Hugo and Nebula awards, came to *Babylon 5* just this year, when she caught all of the first four seasons

in the space of a month. Her most recent books are *Cross and Crescent* and the upcoming *Star Trek* novel *Vulcan's Heart*, written with Josepha Sherman. Schwartz sees *Babylon 5* as having had all the best elements of space opera, in more than one sense.

"One of the things I like about science fiction is the ability to create a narrative, especially in an era in which narrative often is downplayed, set against a backdrop of a wholly created world or world, and enacted by characters who grow and change. If it's well done, you have a sort of history of the future—and you have space opera."

Schwartz enjoyed the fact that she watched the whole first four seasons in the space of a month. "This enabled me to get the full sweep of the narration, which is a grand one, and to watch the characters evolve before my eyes. The intricate, five-seasons-long plot arc is new to TV, and it's delightful in an action show—as opposed to a soap opera."

The fact that she came to the show so late moved her to contact Straczynski. "Halfway through, I E-mailed JMS to thank him: I frankly haven't been swept up like this since I read *The Lord of the Rings* or got introduced to the sea novels of Patrick O'Brian, or started researching Romulans for *Vulcan's Forge* and *Vulcan's Heart*. He welcomed me to the party—better late than never."

As for her prospective reaction to the end of the series, Schwartz says that when she finally watches the last episode, "I expect to cry my eyes out."

Jeanne Cavelos will also miss the show now that it is over. She was the editor of the first series of *Babylon 5* novels, published by Dell, and she wrote one of the most popular ones, *The Shadow Within*. Her latest book is *The Science of the X-Files*. Like many other writers, she was attracted to *Babylon 5* by the idea of a television show with a complete story arc.

"I love the show for many different reasons, but a number of them revolve around the same qualities: continuity and completeness. In having a beginning, middle, and end, *Babylon 5* has become a complete work of art, like a novel. This allows it to have deeper, overarching themes. While a weekly TV show without these qualities can still have themes, they don't have the same power and resonance. These qualities also allow the show to tell an epic story."

"A movie is like a novella. A miniseries is like a novella with a lot of padding. But *Babylon 5* is like an epic novel, with multiple inter-related plot-lines and building sections that lead to climaxes of incredible power."

"We've never been able to see something of this depth, complexity and unity in science fiction before. And the changes that we've followed the characters through have felt both real and surprising."

A frequent watcher of science fiction shows on television, Cavelos feels that *B5* was unique and will continue to influence other shows. "*Babylon 5* did something no

other show has done before... We'll probably see more continuity of story lines, and more long-term story lines. But I tend to doubt that another show will have the guts to do the most revolutionary thing *Babylon 5* has done, which is to have an ending. Only an idealist and a visionary would be crazy enough to pre-program his show for death. That's what we love about JMS."

Her reaction to the end of the show is sadness, she says, but also "satisfaction and fulfillment. The show has become something precious and complete in my memory. Like the reign of King Arthur and the time of Camelot, it is a precious time that cannot be forgotten."

The last word, of course, has to belong to the Great Maker, J. Michael Straczynski himself. When I asked him about his feelings towards the end of *Babylon 5*, he replied: "There's nothing I can say about the end of *Babylon 5* that can really convey what I feel about it. The last five minutes (plus credits) of 'Sleeping in Light' puts me away every time. Something about it all brings the whole weight of the five-year story to bear on the viewer, and it's almost too much for me."

"I think that it *has* had an influence on televised SF in America. I think that we've shown you can treat it seriously, and trust the audi-



Londo Mollari and Vir Cotto (Peter Jurasik, Stephen Furst) in the Imperial Palace on *Centauri Prime*.

ence to have an attention span longer than five minutes, that they will come to the table with intelligence and a willingness to question and discuss and consider. Sure, not everybody's going to come to that particular table, but that's OK. I never went into this thinking that *Babylon 5* was going to be a runaway pop culture phenomenon; it's always going to appeal to a very sharp portion of the audience, much as *The Prisoner* continues to hold onto a very particular sort of audience. And that's OK with me.

"I'm happy to have done a show that points

to the literary roots of science fiction, that has led viewers who might not otherwise have done so to go to their bookstore and buy a book by Alfred Bester, or go to their first SF convention. *Star Trek* brought a whole new audience into the science fiction community, and now *Babylon 5* has done the same, which cannot be a bad thing.

"I know that no matter what I've done before this, and whatever follows afterward, *Babylon 5* is the one thing I'll be most remembered for, and I'm fine with that as well. It's my grand opera, the most intense thing I've ever done, and it damn near killed me. And I don't think anyone else is likely to do quite the same thing ever again because you have to be insane to

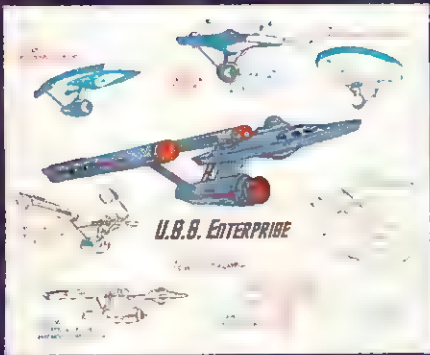
try it. If I'd known just how much of a drain it would be, how hideously rough the road would've been, I think I might've questioned going ahead. But I didn't know it was impossible at the time, so I just sort of went ahead and did it.

"For me, the end of *Babylon 5* is the end of something very special, and the last episode makes you realize that we may never see its like again; it makes you realize what we had here by being able to look back at the totality of it all in the series of images that come at the end. I'm honored to have been a part of it." □

STAR TREK

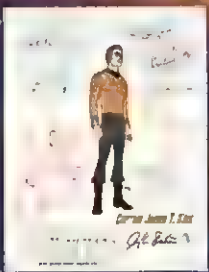
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GAMES

By Eric T. Baker

Shadowrun cyberpunks gather, while Klingon killers bring the eye candy.



ABOVE: Cybernetic wizards continue to mix SF and Fantasy in FASA's Shadowrun RPG. BELOW: Star Trek: The Next Generation Klingon Honor Guard puts actual Trek actors into your computer.

THE FIRST GAME DESIGNER I EVER GOT TO KNOW even a little was Paul Hume. In the 1980s, he and his partner, Bob Charrette, had just followed up *Bushido*, a stand-alone game of medieval Japanese role-playing, with *Aftermath*, a stand-alone game of post-holocaust role-playing. When I met Paul, they were negotiating to do a *Horse Clans* game, but that never came off. What they made instead was *Shadowrun*, the first great fusion game franchise. Ten years later, Paul and Bob are on to other things, but *Shadowrun* is still going strong, and Michael Mulvihill has just overseen the release of the basic rules' 3rd edition. (*Shadowrun, 3rd Edition*. Written and Developed by Michael Mulvihill with Robert Boyle. Created by Tom Dowd, Paul Hume, and Bob

Charrette. FASA Corporation, Chicago, IL 1998. 336 pgs, \$30.00)

Shadowrun is a cyberpunk role-playing game of the near future with the twist that magic has been reborn and the elder races have returned. Besides humans of all flavors, it is a world populated by Troll bouncers, Elfin deckers (cyberspace cowboys), Dwarf riggers (telepresence truck drivers), and Ork Shamans. Wizards duel cybernetically enhanced street samurai, while dragons sit on corporate boards and Amerinds govern their reclaimed lands. It is a world where no party of players, *Shadowrunners*, is ready to attempt a mission until they've stocked up on machine-gun ammo and spirit magic fetishes. It is a terrifically cool background, particularly when you consider that it was introduced before half of all game systems strove to universally represent every genre, and before fusion games ("It's the old West, but set in space!") became the norm instead of the exception.

Why a 3rd edition of *Shadowrun*? The answer is not that FASA is feeling the same money squeeze as every other game publisher, and they needed a reason to have the fans of *Shadowrun* buy all the books again, this new edition does not make any of the previous books obsolete. What it does do is pull a lot of core rules that had been scattered through 10 years of supplements all into one place. The 3rd edition does not replace supplements like the *Grimoire* (rules for spell casters) and *Virtual Realities* (rules for deckers), because it does not reprint all their source material, background essays, and equipment write-ups. What the 3rd edition does contain is all the actual rules that were in the supplements. Rather than a ploy to make old fans buy the books again; this edition is an attempt to get new players to enter the world by putting all the rules they need in one place.

There are some rule changes. Adepts—magic users who turn their power inward to allow themselves to perform amazing physical feats, who in the 1st edition were noticeably tougher than their street samurai rivals, and who in the 2nd edition were noticeably weaker than those same street samurai—are now back to being just as tough as their chromed-up friends. The costs, benefits, and limitations of being nonhuman have been changed so that it is now cheaper to be some races and more expensive to be others. In the 2nd edition, they were all the same.

The biggest change, however, in the new edition of *Shadowrun* is the initiative system. It has been altered to give everyone at least one chance to do something in a turn. Characters roll for initiative, the characters with magical or cybernetic aids getting to roll more dice. In the 1st and 2nd editions, the turn began on the phase of the highest roll, and characters had to wait until



3:06 PM
head out for anniversary
gift for girlfriend

3:21 PM
run into fellow player with Bajoran
rescue deck

7:22 PM
resign yourself to celibate lifestyle



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Star Trek: Deep Space Nine™ set
summer 1998



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the phases counted down to their initiative roll before they could act. It was not uncommon for samurai to act two and three times before a normal-speed character got his first action. For the 3rd edition, the countdown has been reversed. Now every character acts on phase 1 (in order of initiative so the high roll still goes first), and then the phases count up. Fast characters still get their extra actions, but now they come after Joe Average has had a chance to perform an action of his own. Not only does this make sense in the game world, it also lets some of the GM's lovingly prepared NPCs actually have a chance to dive for cover before two or three unanswered shots are pumped into them.

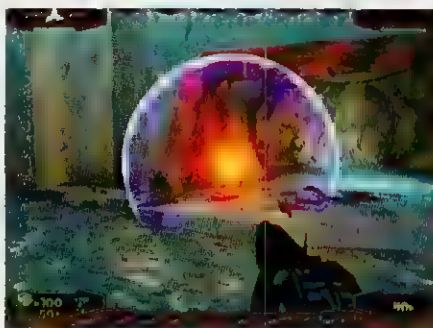
If you have never played *Shadowrun* before, you now have an easy place to start. If you've been playing *Shadowrun* for years, you now have all the rules in one place without any of your supplements being rendered useless. Either way, you owe it to yourself to give this edition a look.

Star Trek: The Next Generation Klingon Honor Guard. Produced by Alex De Lucia and Jay Luss, designed by Christopher Clark with David Ellis, lead-programmed by Les Bird. Microprose, Alameda, CA 1998, Win 95 CD-ROM, \$49.95.

Whenever you sit down to play a first-person 3-D shooter, the two most important

questions are always, "What am I shooting," and "What am I shooting it with?" In *Star Trek: The Next Generation Klingon Honor Guard*, "shooting" is often the wrong word. In this game it is more often, "What am I cutting," and "What am I cutting it with?" The answers are, "Other Klingons" and "With my D'k Tahg." There are eight firearms in *KHG*, but most often the best weapon is the one you start with, the three-bladed dagger. There are 16 different enemies in *KHG*, but five of them are various flavors of Klingon. These are both good things. Killing Klingon's in hand-to-hand combat is a blast.

KHG uses the Unreal 3-D engine, developed



by Digital Extremes and Epic Megagames for their first-person shooter of that name. There is good news and bad news about Unreal. The good news is that on a sufficiently high-powered machine, Unreal lives up to its name with colors, textures, and effects, plus stereo sounds never before seen or heard in a first-person shooter. The bad news is that if your machine isn't up to Unreal's requirements (at least a Pentium 200 with 32 Megs of RAM and a 3-D card), then you aren't going to see most of the eye and ear candy. The game still runs, but it just doesn't look that much better than any of its competitors.

The story line of *KHG* is that the player's character is a recruit, training to join the Klingon Honor Guard, founded by Kahless himself. The Guard is charged with defending the Klingon High Council, a job that often has them acting more like spies than warriors. The player is halfway into a holodeck training regime when the High Council is attacked. The player is called forth and sent on the trail of the would-be assassins. This story line is mostly told by way of cut scenes, which use the voice talent of Tony Todd (Commander Kurn), Robert O'Reilly (Gowron), Gwyneth Walsh (B'Etor), and Barbara March (Lursa). The chase takes the player through 19 missions on seven different worlds, as well as on a Klingon Bird of Prey.

By trading the *KHG* characters and settings for the creatures and weapons of the Unreal game, Microprose has greatly improved the playing experience. It is much more interesting to fight Klingons, Andorians, and Nausicans than it was to fight Unreal's various flavors of Skaarj. *KHG*'s villains are (except for the fish) free of the plague of randomly attached



claws, cybernetics, fangs, and guns that afflicts so many 3-D shooter bad guys. The opponents in *KHG* are almost all humanoid. They shoot at you with common, honest guns, and when you get close, they pull out nice, honest knives, axes, and swords to try to finish you off. The opponents are scanned in so that they have very realistic faces. This is good. Unfortunately, each opponent type has the same face. You feel like you are killing the same Klingon captain over and over, the same Andorian over and over, and so on. The humanoids should have either been put in masks, as they are in *Sin*, or else more facial "skins" (the images put over the animated "bodies" of the characters) should have been programmed in.

And as long as I'm asking for more "skins," there should also have been more wounded skins. As it is, the game gets it sort of half right. Attack an opponent from behind, or hit him in the head instead of the armored chest, and that opponent dies much faster. Unfortunately, even if you take the time to line up and throw your D'k Tahg into the back of an enemy's head, the wound will appear as a gaping red hole on his chest. These phantom wounds may seem a picky complaint since it is only in the past couple of years that enemies in shooters have started reacting to being wounded at all, but the game is already making terrific demands on the computer running it. Why did Microsoft go halfway in handing out bloody wounds when *Quake II*, Unreal's main competition, allows players to not only bloody the villains' heads, but also to blow them clean off?

If you are a devotee of *Star Trek*, particularly one who has always liked the Klingons, then *KHG* is well worth your money. It is a 3-D experience that immerses you in the *Star Trek* world and gives you a chance to harmlessly explore your more violent fantasies. The game's only flaws are when some failure of internal logic jars you out of the experience (like when the wounds appear in the wrong place), and the simple fact that there is no way to interact with the other characters except for killing them. Those flaws to the side, *KHG* is a wonderful game.

Tinker's Damn. Created by Andrew LaRoy, Luke Baldwin, and Becky Driver. Studio Cranium, Lewiston, ID 1998. 100 pgs, \$12.95.

A friend of mine sent me a copy of Studio Cranium's *Tinker's Damn*. He thought it was



TOP LEFT & CENTER: Taking aim with Klingon Honor Guard. TOP RIGHT: Campaign Cartographer 2 turns any gamer into an expert map maker. RIGHT: Anime comes to life in Tinker's Damn.

a pretty good game and so do I. *TD* is an anime role-playing game, which means that the art inside and situations portrayed are based on those that occur in the wide and varied content of Japanese animated films and television series. As such, *TD* does not try to limit itself to any one genre or even one fusion setting. Instead, it is a universal system that can handle giant mecha (like those in the *Partabor* series) campaigns just as well as it can handle high school comedy (like *Rama 1/2*) campaigns. The system is a simple one where the characters need to roll only one 20-sided dice to determine both if they hit and what sort of damage they do.

As with any universal system that doesn't fill three binders with rules, *TD* leans heavily on the Game Master to keep the game moving and to rule quickly on things that are not explicitly spelled out in the rules. Similarly, the game leans on the GM for the game's background. Nearly half of the rule-book is source material, but those pages are divided between three very different campaigns. They are neat, entertaining sketches for campaigns, particularly "Hot Rod Apocalypse" which combines sorcery, demons, and muscle cars, but their backgrounds are presented only in broad sketches, to which are added the write-ups for some 30 NPCs and their vehicles.

Studio Cranium is a "garage" gaming company, so you may have trouble finding a copy of the game at your local shop. If you do, try their Web-page at <http://users.lewiston.com/cranium>. The Web-page also has the write-ups for three more campaigns. *TD* is a good game with surprisingly good vehicle rules and some terrific interior art. If you have faith in yourself as a GM to run it, and you game with players who can get into the backgrounds, then it is well worth tracking down.

Campaign Cartographer 2. *ProFantasy Software Ltd., London, England 1998. Win 95, CD-ROM, \$75.95.*

Campaign Cartographer 2 is one of the coolest role-playing utilities ever created. It is a Win 95 program that lets you make clear, legible, and professional-looking maps of wilderness terrain, city streets, dungeons, starships, alien planets, entire continents, and more. *CC2* is such a robust program with so many utilities and features that it compares favorably with mainstream programs like *PageMaker* and (particularly) *PhotoShop*. Like those programs, there is a learning curve to *CC2*, but by the time you have finished the tutorial, you will be able to create gorgeous, multiuse maps in full color. *CC2* is so rich a program that every time you use it you will find some new way to exploit its features.

There are a wide variety of ways in *CC2* to put information on a map. As with most drawing programs, there are several tools for drawing lines and shapes, and fill commands to blanket an area with a color or texture. The heart of *CC2* drawing, though, is the symbol catalog. The program comes with a library of five hundred symbols. There are more avail-

able for download on the company's Web page and you can import your own. Thus, creating your maps is as simple as clicking on the symbol you want and clicking on the map to place it where it needs to be. Cities, trees, houses, doors, furniture, landmarks, and more can all be placed in this manner, in color or black and white.

Maps can be created in *CC2* using layers and incorporating hotspots, links to other files. The advantage of layers is that when it comes time to print out maps for the players to see, you can choose which layers to print. Thus, if the characters manage to download the floorplan of the corporate office they are breaking into, you can print out the layers with the walls, while reserving the layers with the furniture and the guards. Individual items on a map can be set to be nonprinting or invisible, but usually it is easier to do this sort of thing with layers. Hotspots allow you to use the map as an organizer for your campaign, letting you keep your records by the places they are associated with. If the characters are landing at SeaTak airport, double click on it to see what sort of encounters you've planted there.

ProFantasy is a very customers-oriented company. The designers themselves answer technical support questions. The updates, plus the new icons and templates that are posted to the Web site, come as a result of customer suggestions and requests. The company also runs an E-mail list for people who use the program so there is a community of users that you can join from the word go.

Like any powerful tool, *CC2* does have its cost. Making beautiful, professional-looking maps takes time. *CC2* is not a program for making maps on the fly while running a game. Lined paper and a pencil remain a much faster way to get the basic layout across to your players. On the other hand, if you have the time and you want to create handouts that will blow your players away, then *CC2* is the tool you need.

Red Starrise: A Star Drive Adventure.

By Richard Baker. TSR, Inc, Renton, WA 1998. 16pgs. Free with purchase of GM's Guide.

Red Starrise: a Star Drive Adventure is a short introductory adventure that is currently being offered for free from TSR when you buy a copy of their *Alternity Gamemaster Guide*. The adventure places the characters on a scout ship headed to the Hammer System to discover the fate of the lost Silver Bell colony. It sets up events that will form the basis of the published *Star Drive* campaign world, but it is a complete adventure in and of itself. Well, mostly complete. Despite the fact that the characters will be exploring a lost solar system populated now by pirates, scavengers, and other things, there are only three encounters and three settings detailed in the book. On the other hand, *Red Starrise* is that rarest of things, a published module that can be completed in a single sitting. If only you didn't have to buy a \$30 rulebook to get it. □

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IDENTITY FACTORY

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"Don't we all try to be something we're not? The difference is, now you don't have to act anymore. Now you can *be* who you want to be for real."

"But I don't..."

"Don't what?"

Lou shook his head. "I don't know what I want."

Hudson shook his head. "You may think you don't know. But actually you do. And we can help you get in touch with it. You want to be a big business tycoon? A babe magnet? A TV star? A super salesperson? We can give you the personality traits, the knowledge, the self-confidence... the rest is up to you."

"And I'd be happy?"

"Absolutely."

"But I wouldn't be me anymore."

"Isn't that the whole point? I mean, with all due respect, Lou, is it so great being you?"

"Maybe it's not so great," Lou said. "But isn't that what Kierkegaard said? To live is to be anxious? Something like that."

Hudson was shaking his head from side to side. "Don't you ever get tired, always questioning yourself and everything else? Wouldn't you like things clear and simple for once? Wouldn't you like to be *sure* who you really are?"

"And Freud," Lou continued, "he said the natural state of the mature human being was a qualified unhappiness.... Or was that F. Scott Fitzgerald?"

"Just listen to yourself, Lou," Hudson said. "I mean, really *listen* for a moment. And then tell me you wouldn't rather be someone else."

Lou stood and thought for a long moment.

"I can make you happy," Hudson said. "Trust me."

And suddenly he gave in.

"All right," he said. "Give it your best shot."

11 ■

MARIE CALLED THE NEXT day to apologize.

"I'm sorry for rushing off like that the other night. I don't know what got into me."

"Don't worry about it."

"I feel like such an idiot," Marie said. "You know, I actually went through their idiotic tests. They had this whole program worked out for me. If you can believe it, I was going to quit my job and work part time as a cocktail waitress while writing romance novels."

"Well," Lou said, "you would look good in one of those short skirts. And I always thought you had a hidden romantic streak."

"They really had me going for a moment," she said. "But I came to my senses at the last moment. You were right, Lou. You were right all along. Anyway, I guess I'll see you at college."

"You bet."

12 ■

LOU WAS WATERING his bonsai tree and listening to an Enya CD when Calvin

Hudson came to call. He put down his watering can and turned down the music and opened the door.

"How're you feeling?" Hudson asked.

Lou raised his hand and touched the implant behind his ear. It itched slightly, but otherwise appeared to be completely healed.

"Good," he said.

"And the program?"

"Running good."

"But you had some questions?"

"Yes," Lou said. "I appreciate you coming by."

"Like I told you, Lou, this is about information. We need to know what works and what doesn't. So if you're unhappy, I want to know that."

"Actually I've been feeling pretty good. It's just that I expected a little *more*."

"More what?" Hudson asked, taking a cigarette pack out of his pocket and looking around for an ashtray. "Mind if I smoke, by the way?"

"Yes, I do mind," Lou said, fussily. "Secondhand smoke kills, you know that. Besides, this is Tuesday."

Hudson put the pack away. "It's under control," he said. "You were saying, you expected more."

"More change," Lou said. "I mean, some things are different. I suddenly have this interest in bonsai, and making my own wine, and going to basketball games. But I'm still a college teacher."

"And you're not enjoying life?"

"I'm enjoying it. But it's, I don't know, kind of dull."

"It's what the tests told us Lou. Sometimes it just turns out that way. You find out that you're already what you ought to be, with maybe a little fine-tuning."

"I guess I was hoping for something a little more exciting. Like a test pilot. Or maybe a movie director."

Hudson shook his head sadly. "It wouldn't work. It would conflict with your underlying personality structures, ultimately producing trauma." He got to his feet. "But if you don't like the results of our work, we can take it out and offer you a full refund."

Lou stared over at his bonsai, which was beginning to take shape. The radio was playing a particularly good Enya track. Over by the window, the papers for next year's course plans were spread out on his desk. He had always winged it before, but was looking forward to taking a more methodical approach. With a little more work, he could be a better teacher, perhaps even an inspiring teacher.

Besides, he had tickets for the Raptors game tonight. Tomorrow he was going over to Al's to listen to some Mel Tormé tapes. And next week he was taking delivery on his new Volvo.

"No," he said. "I think I'll try it for a while longer." □

MARLA AND THE EELER

Continued from page 65

pun intended) to do a thing. Juan-Pedro grabbed Marla and got out of there.

Well, what he did was illegal, of course. Eelers aren't supposed to use their tazers even in self-defense, let alone in the middle of a bar brawl.

Marla was devastated. I found her in the ladies' room at the slipper factory. She had spent the whole rest of the night crashed after all that junk, crying her eyes out. Did I know about Juan-Pedro's peculiar talents? Why hadn't I told her? Oh, her life was ruined.

I was real uncomfortable about this, because I figured with her so tight with the boss, chances are I might be looking for other work, and I better brush up my knowledge of Windows 2020.

"I allowed him to *touch* me," she moaned. "That loathsome, unnatural—"

And on and on.

I WAITED FOR THE AXE TO FALL. I SURE HAD been stupid. What a stupid prank. I tried to call Juan-Pedro, but his simulacrum just said he wasn't available, speak into the envelope if you want to leave a message.

I was on tenterhooks, but nothing happened. Then one day Marla didn't turn up at work, and the next, also. She was gone a week, and I was too scared to ask my boss what had happened to her. I thought of phoning her apartment, but I couldn't even look her simulacrum in the eye, let alone if she answered the phone herself, all depressed and betrayed and lovelorn and disgusted.

THE NEXT THING I HEARD, MARLA WAS LEAVING the company. For why? To get married!

Seems somebody had filmed Juan-Pedro's stunt at the goth club, sold it to Paramount Stardust. It came complete with shocks if you wanted to play the vampire's heads. Big hit. That was the good news.

But somebody in Immigration saw it, recognized Juan-Pedro, and he got deported. And Marla was in trouble with her boss for "consorting with a known criminal," as if she had any idea at all. Oh boy, I thought, get two people in trouble for the price of one.

Marla hated him for awhile, but when she realized she would never see him again—well, she got thinking about those special talents eeler men are supposed to have. Guess it's not just a stereotype. To make a long story short, she decided she had enough saved for the trip up.

Juan-Pedro wrote me all this in a letter, see. It takes months to get letters from Mars, but it was worth waiting. I was so relieved. I guess I'll never play matchmaker again, especially as a joke.

Juan-Pedro says he's against it, but Marla is talking about having an eeler baby. They're just as cute as the regular kind, and you never have to worry about kidnapping. □

DARK CALVARY

Continued from page 74

amid such devastation. "What greater love could I show you than to allow you to share in the salvation of the world? Through our sacrifice, Hans, we will be granted eternal life."

He wanted, then, to scream at her—to ask how she could allow herself to believe in such perversion? But the time for such questioning was long gone.

And, besides, he knew... She had always sought something more than mere existence, and here, at last, she had found it.

"Hans," she whispered now. "Hans, please tell me that you understand. Please hold me."

Cramer stepped forward.

He felt the dart slam into the meat of his lower back. The plainsong crescendoed, becoming something beautiful and at the same time terrible, and he pitched forward and slipped into oblivion.

HE SURFACED SLOWLY THROUGH AN ocean of analgesics and sedatives. He found himself in darkness, something wet tied around his neck. With realization came pain, and he cried aloud. Then, perhaps hours later, they laid him out again and put him under, and though he wanted to rage and scream at the injustice, the futility of what they were doing to him, all he could manage was a feeble moan of protest.

He came to his senses to find himself tied upright—to a cross?—four points of numbness where his arms and legs had been. Beside him he could hear the Abbot, moaning in masochistic ecstasy. He considered what a gruesome trinity they must present upon the altar.

"Francesca," he whispered. "Oh, Francesca, the pain..."

"The pain, Hans," she replied, "the pain is part of the sacrifice."

He laughed, and then wept, and then fell silent.

Francesca continued, her voice a whisper. She lovingly detailed what further sacrifices they would be called upon to make. Next, she said, would come the expert excision of their genitalia; after that they would be skinned alive. And then the Master Surgeon would remove their internal organs one by one: kidneys, liver, lungs, and finally their hearts, while all the time they were conscious of what was taking place, the better to appreciate their sacrifice.

"Hans," she whispered. "Can you feel it? Can you? The wonder, the joy?"

He could feel nothing but pain and lapsed into unconsciousness. He awoke from time to time, unable to tell how long he had spent in blessed oblivion, or what further surgical mutilations they had carried out upon his body.

What followed became a nightmare without respite. During the day, when the heat was at its most intense, they were lifted from the altar and set side by side in the opening of

the cliff face, while the congregation chanted their medieval, monotone chant in hope of miracles. The pain was constant, at its worst in the heat of the day, dulling to a tolerable agony during the night.

Toward the end, Cramer dreamed of rescue: He hallucinated the arrival of a pirate ship come to set them free. Then he came to his senses and realized that for him there would be no release, no return to physical well-being. He was a prisoner of Tartarus, a jail more secure than any of ancient myth.

On the very last day they were carried outside and positioned before the scalding light of the sun. Cramer sensed heightened activity among the order of monks, hurried movement and hushed conversation suggesting panic and disbelief. He felt the heat of the sun searing his flesh and laughed aloud at the knowledge of his victory.

Francesca maintained her faith until the very end. In mounting fear she intoned: "And it is written that the Ultimate Sacrifice shall rise from the dead, and will guide the faithful to the lost temple of the Starque, and through the sacrifice of the holy trinity the sun will cease its swelling..."

Cramer was torn between exacting revenge upon the person responsible for his torture and keeping the one he loved in ignorance. A part of him wanted to impose upon her his rationalization of what had happened, explain that there had been no miracles at all.

He said nothing. If he were to make her comprehend the tragedy and evil of their predicament, the insane fanaticism of the accursed Church, he would only inflict upon her a greater torture than that she had suffered already.

The end came within the hour, and swiftly. He felt his skin shrivel in the intense heat and was aware of Francesca and the Abbot to his left and right. Francesca was murmuring a constant prayer, and the Abbot from time to time laughed in manic ecstasy.

All around them sounded the monks' frantic chants, the importuning of the faithful to their oblivious God.

In rapture, Cramer heard the detonation of multiple thunder and the roar of the approaching firestorm as the sun exploded and unleashed its terrible freight of radiation.

He turned his head. "Abbot!" he whispered with his very last breath. "You bastards didn't get my heart! So much for your superstition!"

The holy man could only laugh. "For our sacrifice," he began, "we will be granted life ever—"

Cramer should have known that the righteous would forever have the last word.

"Hans!" He heard the small voice to his left. She was crying, now. "Hans, please say you love me..."

But before he could speak, before he could accede to Francesca's final wish, the blast-front reached the surface of Tartarus Major with a scream like that of a million souls denied, and Cramer gave thanks that his suffering was at a blessed end. □

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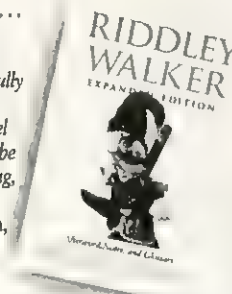
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Then Venus explodes.

In an eruption that quickly reveals some peculiar physics going on—fundamental particles the size of bacteria spinning out of the chaos—a new daylight-visible phenomena draws attention back to the skies. Lifestyles must change due to the increase in radiation sweeping toward Earth from what amounts to a planet-sized supercollider.

All of which is interesting but secondary to geologist Henry Meacher. Detached from NASA, Henry travels with a moonrock sample to Edinburgh, Scotland to study it as part of an international science program at the University of Edinburgh, one of several universities to independently study the remaining moonrocks from the old *Apollo* days. Henry is bitter—NASA shot down his project to send unmanned probes to the south lunar pole in search of water-ice—and he is in the midst of a nasty divorce from his astronaut wife, whom he partially blames for the cancellation of his project. He feels that in the greater scheme of things, his career is over, and the post at Edinburgh to study what is presumed to be a piece of lunar bedrock is a kind of exile.

Mishandling at the lab, though, releases some grains from the sample. Ard Tor, the old volcanic plug against which part of Edinburgh is built, becomes the site of an eerie phenomenon. The grains, exposed to air and sunlight, begin to reproduce themselves, like a disease, using basalt as a material source, eating into the ancient rock and converting it. Too late, Henry realizes that this is what must have happened to Venus—because the Moonseed, as it is dubbed by a group of cultists, is elegantly simple, undecipherable, and inexorable, and if a way to stop it is not found it will convert the very mantle of the planet.

Baxter plays with the theme of dissolution and disease throughout the book. Dr. Monica Beus, chief science adviser to the President, learns early on that she has cancer; Blue Ishiguro, a colleague of Henry's and a specialist in volcanoes (and one of the best characters in the novel) is asthmatic, at the end of his career; Jane Dundas, the woman who becomes Henry's lover and soulmate, contracts leukemia; Henry is divorced from his wife, Geena; Jane's husband had run off years earlier; a portrait of the Russian space program is almost heartbreaking as a study in futile courage. Through it all, Baxter seems to be reminding us that it's the little things that will get us in the end, the small things that will eat us up, rather than epic disasters.

But an epic disaster is what ultimately occurs in *Moonseed* and Baxter follows the logic of the catastrophe without flinching.

There are a great many small delights in

Moonseed. Baxter lovingly describes a renewed effort to reach the Moon. His attention to detail and his ability to bring it to life are welcome boosters for a prospace ideology, even if, thematically, the threat to get us back into space turns out to be an ultimate threat. The infestation of *Moonseed* takes place on Ard Tor which, Baxter tells us, means "Arthur's Seat" in current parlance, but, as this is Scotland and Arthur has little to do with local mythology, an older root, Gaelic, yields the meaning, "The Height of Thor." Thor, the god of thunder, has an off-stage presence throughout the novel (even Henry gets a dramatic kind of Viking funeral in the end). But there's a third meaning here. An ard was a lightweight plough, common in the Bronze Age of England, and a tor is a mountain. The Moonseed is, metaphorically and literally, a mountain plough.

Moonseed is a thoroughly convincing, harrowing romp in the disaster-novel arena. But it also reminds us that not all disasters begin with large, obvious signs. While we're waiting for the Big One, the little ones might slip in and get us first.

Mark Tiedemann

Distraction, by Bruce Sterling. Bantam Spectra, hardcover, 432 pages, \$23.95.

In the year 2044, half the citizens of the magnificently screwed-up United States of America are on a permanent nomad drop-out trip that makes the Burning Man/Rainbow Nation festivals look like a gathering of Zurich bankers. The U.S. federal government is crippled by the existence of fossilized competing Emergency Committees, the old constitutional system riven by dozens of rival political parties, one of which just put a millionaire Native American president in the White House with a tiny percentage of the available votes. U.S. currency is nonconvertible beyond the nation's borders. The Chinese have wiped out the information economy America was counting on for prosperity. Due to the greenhouse effect, coastal cities are drowned or drowning, and the desperate Dutch are America's current foreign bogeyman. In Louisiana, a secessionist governor, Green Huey, has an Air Force base besieged. Meanwhile, a scientific establishment increasingly disconnected from sociopolitical realities, continues to turn out really neat inventions that only serve to pave the road to hell with obsolescent laptops.

And the most unpredictably disturbing fact about this scenario? Not only is this sham-bolic era a truly exciting and fertile time to be alive, generating more ironic laughter than any 12 *Simpsons* episodes, but also the outcome of this warped and desperate future seems to depend in large part on an amoral unborn superman with the hots for a Plain-Jane Nobel-prize-winning biochemist.

No, the book I'm describing is not the latest novel from Ron Goulart recharged to the heights of his parodic *After Things Fell Apart* (1970). It's not another satire from Marc Laid-

law, whose *Kalifornia* (1993) had a similar heft. Despite the canny, clear-sighted cynicism about politics and the entertainment industry, it's not Norman Spinrad updating his *Russian Spring* (1991) or *Bug Jack Barron* (1969) or *Pictures at 11* (1994). Although marked by a quasi-journalistic approach, this isn't a collaboration between Tom Wolfe and Hunter Thompson. And, although perhaps closest in style and substance, John Brunner's magnificent quartet—*Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), *The Jagged Orbit* (1969), *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), and *The Shockwave Rider* (1975)—have not yet been boiled down into one volume.

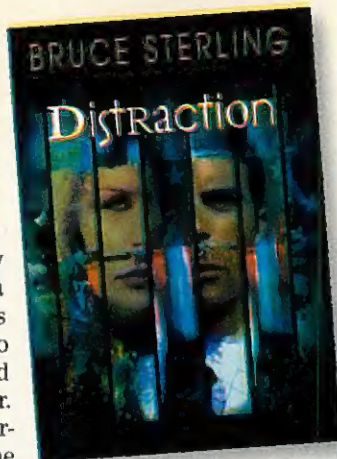
No, the novel under discussion today, *Distraction*, is the latest from the one and only Austin oracle, Bruce Sterling. While utterly recognizable as a Sterling opus, continuing many of his trademark themes and tactics, this book breaks new ground for Sterling. Unlike 1996's dark, mortality-shadowed, Eurocentric *Holy Fire*, which firmly bestrode the Wellsian utopic-dystopic axis, *Distraction* is a daylit, chaotic carnival ride through a quintessentially American amusement park, replete with sticky cotton-candy messes, upset stomachs, and the feeling that too much fun is not enough.

Twenty-eight-year-old Oscar Valparaiso is the perfect model of the modern political operative, along the familiar lines of Carville/Stephanopolous/Morris. Inexhaustible, willing to take advantage of every flaw of human nature no matter how low he must stoop, Oscar is the kind of go-getter whose favorite word of praise is "doable." Unfortunately, despite desiring political prestige, Oscar is doomed forever to remain a behind-the-scenes string-puller, since he is also a biological freak, having been created in a South American gene-splicing lab and brought to term in vitro. (This foreign origin and role also humorously call to mind another contemporary Machiavelli, Henry Kissinger.) Having recently succeeded in getting his candidate—an eccentric Massachusetts architect named Alcott Bambakias, who shadows such real-life high-minded liberals as Sen. Claiborne Pell—elected to the Senate, Oscar receives the assignment to visit and investigate an east Texas pork barrel science lab. There, it becomes his fate to fall into calculated love with one Dr. Greta Penninger; to run afoul of the vindictive and megalomaniacal Louisiana governor, Green Huey, and his vision of a "gumbo future"; to engineer an anarchic coup at the science lab (shades of Leonard Wibberly's *The Mouse that Roared* [1955]); and to uncover an insidious plot to subvert the very basis of human cognition.

By the novel's terminus, the indefatigable Oscar, despite having encountered career and bodily failures that would halt a lesser man in his tracks, stands poised to achieve a goal very nearly indistinguishable from ruling the world.

The large cast surrounding Oscar is almost as colorful as their leader. Politicians and their spouses, nomads, soldiers, security

men, and average citizens are all rendered instantly unique via Sterling's colorful dialogue and flair for individuation. Dr. Penninger, an unlovely genius who's a few test-tubes short in the practicality department, undergoes a sea-change beneath Oscar's molding hand, turning into a horny, power-obsessed rebel: in other words, Dr. Oscar Frankenstein's perfect mate. Together, the unlikely pair of "hopeful monsters" struggle in a cause alternately self-sacrificing and self-aggrandizing: to rid the world of a kind of soul-sickness. They hope to eliminate the manifold "distractions" of deconstructionist, postmodern life; to put an end to the "Loud Ages," and to restore the civil polity. As Greta says, identifying the enemy, "It's the Age of Noise. We've destroyed our society with how much we know, and how quickly and ran-



domly we can move it around."

Sterling anatomizes and dramatizes all these sociopolitical problems as cleverly as a surgeon through a series of do-or-die escalating crises, well-integrated infodumps, shocking throwaway lines ("Back when the U.S. was still in the U.N."), and through mordant dialogue. Oscar's blunt pronouncements are particularly wry, and Sterling's language seldom flags. Nor does Sterling descend from his usual

high level of speculation. From self-assembling buildings to organic watches, this keenly visionary writer builds a future so tactile it might bootstrap itself into being.

Offering insights into the politics of science and the science of politics, populated with engaging rogues and rascals, *Distraction* is Allen Drury filtered through Buckminster Fuller, with just a tinge of Harold Robbins.

Paul Di Filippo

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

Stars and Stripes Forever, by Harry Harrison (Del Rey). A divided United States must battle an England that seeks its total destruction. The famed *Stainless Steel Rat's* creator delivers a well-crafted alternate history epic.

The Work of Jack Williamson: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide, by Richard A. Hauptmann (NESFA Press). Before SF even had a name, Jack Williamson was there writing it. This volume provides a detailed history of an amazing writer's unparalleled output.

The Boss in the Wall, by Avram Davidson and Grania Davis (Tachyon Publications). Gregory Benford calls this "a last powerful and major work by a major and powerful author." Peter S. Beagle and Michael Swanwick provide touching introductions to this career-capping novel.

Spectrum 5: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art, edited by Cathy Fenner and Arnie Fenner (Underwood Books). Let everyone else wait hours to see that Van Gogh exhibit. Visit a far better museum in the comfort of your own home, specializing in the SF's finest artists.

Alien Pets, edited by Denise Little (DAW). In future, the human race will still need cats and dogs and the small aliens that might replace them. Rusch, Haldeman, Williamson and others report back with stories on animalistic SF.



Starlight 2, edited by Patrick Neilsen Hayden (Tor). The first in this series was the best original anthology in years. Now Starlight does it again with stories by Martha Soukup, Carter Scholz, Jonathan Lethem, Geoffrey Landis, and others.

The Lost Work of Stephen King: A Guide to Unpublished Manuscripts, Alternative Versions and Oddities, by Steve Spignesi (Carol Publishing Group). This volume won't tell you why King's SF is continually marketed as Horror, but it will tell you everything else you need to know.

Hoka! Hoka! Hoka!, by Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson (Baen). Never before in one volume are these tales of the conflict that results when the Interbeing League makes contact with an alien species resembling teddy bears. Delightful stories from two of SF's greatest masters.

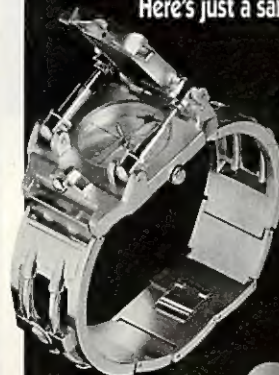
The Crook Factory, by Dan Simmons (Avon). A collection of shorter works by the award-winning author of the classic novels *Hyperion* and *Carrión Comfort*. If you missed his breathtaking stories when they first appeared during their original magazine publication, now is your chance to correct this grievous error.

First Contacts: The Essential Murry Leinster, edited by Joe Rico (NESFA Press). These classic tales by one of our best include the author's Hugo Award-winning story "Exploration Team." With an introduction by Hal Clement.



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INTERNET

By Cory Doctorow

AFTER MUCH PROcrastination, I've put up an archive of this column online at my site, at <http://www.craphound.com>. If you have any suggestions or recommendations for sites to be reviewed herein, e-mail me at doctorow@craphound.com. Thanks this month go to Martin Kelly, Michael Walsh, Martha Soukup, and Pat York.

Everyone knows everyone, eventually. We've all played this game at parties: "Oh, you went to Miskatonic U? Do you know Thomas Dennison? You do? I dated his sister!" and so on. A popculture version, *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*, has made headlines on slow news days for the last couple of years. It's about time that someone formalized the kooky, serendipitous network that binds us all. Someone has: *sixdegrees*, at <http://www.sixdegrees.com>, is a free system for tracing the linkages. Enter your name and e-mail address, list 10 friends, and *voilà*, you can trace your connection to anyone else on the system.

Remember The Visible Man? An entire generation used The Visible Man model kit to mine the dark secrets of the human form, and to learn the basics of abdominal surgery (I can remove a well-labeled appendix armed with nothing but a bottle of acetone and the original instructions). The Visible Man is back! The U.S. National Library of Medicine took a male and a female cadaver, sliced their bodies into 1-mm cross-sections, and then scanned them. The results of this process are available as raw data at *The Visible Human Project* homepage, http://www.nlm.nih.gov/research/visible/visible_human.html. Linked from this site are wicked-cool applications of the dataset, generated by the general public:



anatomical fly-throughs, a "pelvis browser" and more!

Neverworlds is one of the best-looking Web 'zines I've ever seen. Editor Kevin McPherson has assembled an online magazine that's as pretty as any in our genre, at <http://www3.ns.sympa.tico.ca/dechaune/neverworlds/nw-high.htm>. I wish I could laud the fiction as highly but, frankly, I found it slightly stilted and amateurish,

though there were occasional bright spots.

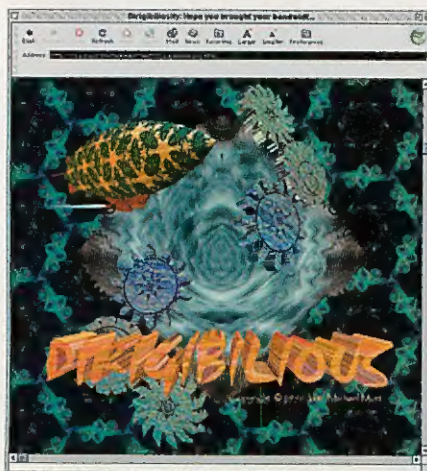
After a years-long drought, *Dr. Demento* faves Firesign Theatre have finally released its new disc, *Give Me Immortality Or Give Me Death*, the story of a radio station on the eve of the millennium, changing formats every five minutes. They've given over their site at <http://www.firesigntheatre.com> to a quirky tribute to said station. Character backgrounds, downloadables.

Since 1982, *FactSheet 5*, the 'Zine of 'Zines, has been the central nexus of 'zine culture the world round. For the uninitiated, a 'zine is a self-published magazine, usually produced by a single person or small group of friends as a labor of love. The 'zine world is full of delightful obsessives who center-staple their visions of work, home, music, art, literature, and excreta on an irregular basis. Whether you want to read or write a 'zine, *FS5* and its online equivalent, *Factsheet 5 Electric* at <http://www.factsheet5.com/> is the place to start.

James O'Ehley asked me to have a boo at his site, *The Sci-Fi Movie Page*, at <http://members.xoom.com/scifimovies/>. The site contains O'Ehley's reviews of hundreds of genre movies, news on upcoming films, message boards, and downloadables. It's nicely organized, easy on the eyes, and an impressive testimony to one filmgoer's obsessions. The reviews, however, tend to be a little superficial, a little lightweight.

Digital Blasphemy is an archive of very high-quality science-fiction artwork for use as Windows startup screens, animations, icons, and wallpaper. Artist Ryan Bliss is a dab hand with 3-D and 2-D image manipulation software, and has produced a hell of a site, at <http://www.digitalblasphemy.com>.

Another spectacular artist-driven site is *Dirigibilosity*, from William Michael Mott. Mott has produced a 3-D-rendered photo-essay/travelogue of a fictional dirigible journey through a crystalline world, at http://www.erc.msstate.edu/~mott/1_Dirigibilosity.html.



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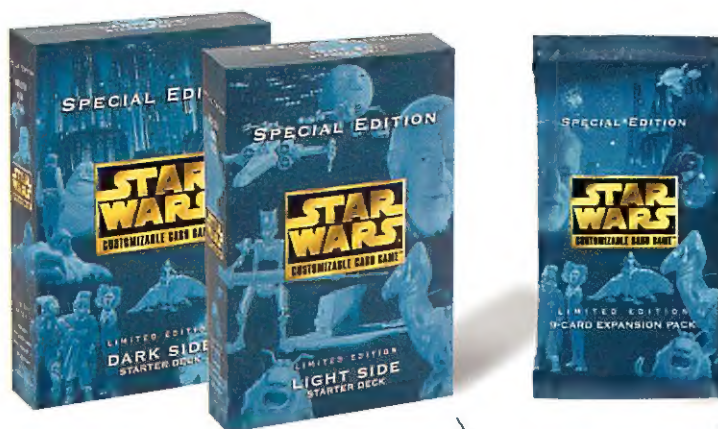
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